

EQUATION OF DOOM—This World Died Screaming

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STORIES



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FEBRUARY 1957
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FICTION

EQUATION OF DOOM By Gerald Vance.....	6
HOME IS WHERE YOU LEFT IT By Adam Chase.....	24
THE NEXT TIME WE DIE By Robert Moore Williams.....	38
DEADLY DECOY By Clyde Mitchell.....	48
QUEST OF THE GOLDEN APE (Part Two) By Ivar Jorgensen and Adam Chase	72

FEATURES

AMAZING BUT TRUE By Paul Steiner.....	5
THE SPACE CLUB	66
TEST YOUR SPACE I.Q.	69
THE REVOLVING FAN By Roger De Soto.....	126
... OR SO YOU SAY By The Readers	129

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Amazing But True . . .

If you still think that vodka originated in Russia, you're a square. Research sponsored by Publicker Distillers, uncovered that vodka was first made in Peru, from there was traced to the Hopewell Indians, of Ohio, who passed the formula along to the ancestors of the Iroquois on the East Coast. When the Vikings sailed south to New England, they encountered vodka, or chakta, as it was then called, and took it back to Scandinavia from where it finally reached Russia.

The Old Egyptians believed that the world rested on four big elephants standing on a giant tortoise swimming in an infinite sea.



Some of our early motorcars had the sawed-off, stuffed, head of a horse in front so that horses drawing carriages wouldn't be scared when meeting one. James Melton, an expert on the era, explains why it didn't do much good: "It was as strange a sight to a horse as a tray of food coming at a diner without a waiter in view."

One of the oddest rifles in existence is on view at the Small Arms School at Hythe, England. It has a damaged muzzle and a blown-out breech. Its story: As it was being fired by an unknown British Tommy from a trench in 1916, a German bullet entered the barrel from the other end. The odds of such a thing happening again are many millions to one.

Around the turn of the century, Joshua Lionel Cowen, whose middle name has become synonymous with model electric trains, encased a dry-cell battery he had invented, in a metal cylinder, put a light bulb on one end and a switch at the other, and then patented what he believed to be the world's first flashlight. But the gadget had so many flaws, he made a gift of it to one of his salesman, Conrad Hubert, who died in the 1920's so wealthy from the invention, which he perfected, that he was able to leave \$15 million to charity.



Tea leaves contain almost twice the amount of caffeine than there is in coffee beans.

—PAUL STEINER



equation of doom

His agony of soul at being unable to save



Margot was far greater than physical torture.

They grounded Ramsey's ship on a hostile planet hoping he would starve to death, so the first thing he did was give most of his money away and lose the rest gambling. Then he picked a fight with the Chief of Police and joined forces with a half-naked dream-chick who was seemingly bent on self-destruction. The stakes were big — a planet or two — but it all added up to an——

Equation of Doom

By GERALD VANCE

“YOUR name ith Jathon Ramthey?” the Port Security Officer lisped politely.

Jason Ramsey, who wore the uniform of Interstellar Transfer Service and was the only Earthman in the Service here on Irwadi, smiled and said: “Take three guesses. You know darn well I’m Ramsey.” He was a big man even by Earth standards, which meant he towered over the Irwadian’s green, scaly head. He was fair of skin and had hair the color of copper. It was rumored on Irwadi and elsewhere that he couldn’t return to Earth because of some crime he had committed.

“Alwayth the chip on the shoulder,” the Port Security Officer said. “Won’t you Earthmen ever learn?” The splay-tongued reptile-human-

oids of Irwadi always spoke Interstellar *Coine* with a pronounced lisp which Ramsey found annoying, especially since it went so well with the officious and underhanded behavior for which the Irwadians were famous the galaxy over.

“Get to the point,” Ramsey said harshly. “I have a ship to take through hyper-space.”

“No. You have no ship.”

“No? Then what’s this?” His irritation mounting, Ramsey pulled out the Interstellar Transfer Service authorization form and showed it to the Security Officer. “A tip-sheet for the weightless races at Fomalhaut VI?”

The Security Officer said: “Ha, ha, ha.” He could not laugh; he merely uttered the phonetic equivalent of laugh-

ter. On harsh Irwadi, laughter would have been a cultural anomaly. "You make joketh. Well, nevertheleth, you have no ship." He expanded his scaly green barrel chest and declaimed: "At 0400 hours thith morning, the government of Irwadi hath planetarithed the Irwadi Tranthfer Thervith."

"Planetarized the Transfer Service!" gasped Ramsey in surprise. He knew the Irwadians had been contemplating the move in theory for many years, but he also knew that transferring a starship from normal space through hyper-space back to normal space again was a tremendously difficult and technical task. He doubted if half a dozen Irwadians had mastered it, yet the Irwadi branch of Interstellar Transfer Service was made up of seventy-five hyper-space pilots of divers planetalities.

"Ecthactly," said the Security Officer, as amused as an Irwadian could be by the amazement in Ramsey's frank green eyes. "Tho if you will kindly thurrender your permit?"

"Let's see it in writing, huh?"

The Security Officer complied. Ramsey read the official

document, scowled, and handed over his Irwadi pilot license. "What about the *Polaris*?" he wanted to know. The *Polaris* was a Centaurian ship he'd been scheduled to take through hyper-space on the run from Irwadi to Centauri III.

"Temporarily grounded, captain. Or should I thay, ecth- captain?"

"Temporarily my foot," said Ramsey. "It'll be months before you Irwadians can get even a fraction of the ships into hyper. You must be out of your minds."

"Our problem, captain. Not yourth."

That was true enough. Ramsey shrugged.

"Your problem," the Security Officer went on blandly, "will be to find a meanth of thelf-thupport until you and all other ecthra-planetarieth can be removed from Irwadi. We owe you ecthra-planetarieth nothing. Ethpect no charity from uth."

Ramsey shrugged. Like all extra-planetaries on a bleak, friendless world like Irwadi, he'd regularly gambled away and drank away his monthly paycheck in the interstellar settlement which the Irwadians had established in the Old Quarter of Irwadi City. But last month he'd managed

to come out even at the gaming tables, so he had a few hundred credits to his name. That would be enough, he told himself, to tide him over until Interstellar Transfer Service came to the rescue of its stranded pilots.

Ramsey went up the gangway and got his gear from the *Polaris*. When he returned down the gangway, the late afternoon wind was blowing across the spacefield tarmac, a wet, bone-chilling wind which only the reptile-humanoid Irwadians didn't seem to mind.

Ramsey fastened the toggles of his cold-weather cape, put his head down and hunched his shoulders, and walked into the teeth of the wind. He did not look back at the *Polaris*, marooned indefinitely on Irwadi despite anything the Centaurian owners or anyone else for that matter could do about it.

The Irwadi Security Officer, whose name was Chind Ramar, walked up the gangway and ordered the ship's Centaurian first officer to assemble his crew and passengers. Chind Ramar allowed himself the rare luxury of a fleeting smile. He could imagine this scene being duplicated on fifty ships here on

his native planet today, fifty outworld ships which had no business at all on Irwadi. Of course, Irwadi was an important planet-of-call in the Galactic Federation because the vital metal titanium was found as abundantly in Irwadian soil as aluminum is found in the soil of an Earth-style planet. Titanium, in alloy with steel and manganese, was the only element which could withstand the tremendous heat generated in the drive-chambers of interstellar ships during transfer. In the future, Chind Ramar told himself with a kind of cold pride, only Irwadian pilots, piloting Irwadian ships through hyper-space, would bring titanium to the waiting galaxy. At Irwadi prices.

With great relish, Chind Ramar announced the facts of planetarization and told the Centaurians and their passengers that they would be stranded for an indefinite period on Irwadi. Amazement, anger, bluster, debate, and finally resignation—the reactions were the expected ones, in the expected order. It was easy, Chind Ramar thought, with all but the interstellar soldiers of fortune like Jason Ramsey. Ramsey, of course, would need watching. As for these others. . . .

One of the others, an Earthgirl whose beauty was entirely missed by Chind Ramar, left the *Polaris* in a hurry. She either had no luggage or left her luggage aboard. Jason Ramsey, she thought. She had read Chind Ramar's mind; a feat growing less rare although by no means common yet among the offspring of those who had spent a great deal of time bombarded by cosmic radiation between the stars. She hurried through the chilling wind toward the Old Quarter of Irwadi City. Panic, she thought. You've got to avoid panic. If you panic, you're finished. . . .

"So that's about the size of it," Ramsey finished.

Stu Englander nodded. Like Ramsey he was a hyper-space pilot, but although he had an Earth-style name and had been born of Earth parents, he was not an Earthman. He had been born on Capella VII, and had spent most of his life on that tropical planet. The result was not an uncommon one for outworlders who spent any amount of time on Irwadi: Stu Englander had a nagging bronchial condition which had kept him off the pilot-bridge for some months now.

Englander nodded again, dourly. He was a short, very slender man a few years older than Ramsey, who was thirty-one. He said: "That ties it. And I mean ties it, brother. You're looking at the brokest Capellan-earthman who ever got himself stuck on an out-world."

"You mean it?"

"Dead broke, Jase."

"What about Sally and the kids?"

Englander had an Arc-turan-earthian wife and twin boys four years old. "I don't know what about Sally and the kids," he told Ramsey glumly. "I guess I'll go over to the New Quarter and try to get some kind of a job."

"They wouldn't hire an out-worlder to shine their shoes with his own spit, Stu. They have got the planetarization bug, and they've got it bad."

Sally Englander called from the kitchen of the small flat: "Will Jase be staying for supper?"

Englander stared at Ramsey, who shook his head. "Not today, Sally," Englander said, looking at Ramsey gratefully.

"Listen," Ramsey lied, "I've been lucky as all get out the last couple of months."

"You old pro!" grinned Englander.

"So I've got a few hundred

credits just burning a hole in my pocket," Ramsey went on. "How's about taking them?"

"But I haven't the slightest idea when I could pay back."

"I didn't say anything about paying me back."

"I couldn't accept charity, Jase."

"O.K. Pay me back when you get a chance. There are plenty of hyper-space jobs waiting for us all over the galaxy, you know that."

"Yeah, all we have to do is get off Irwadi and go after them. But the Irwadians are keeping us right here."

"Sure, but it won't last. Not when the folks back in Capella and Deneb and Sol System hear about it."

"Six months," said Englander bleakly. "It'll take at least that long."

"Six months I can wait. What d'you say?"

Englander coughed rackingly, his eyes watering. He got off the bed and shook Ramsey's hand solemnly. Ramsey gave him three hundred and seventy-five credits and said: "Just see you make that go a long way supporting Sally and the kids. I don't want to see you dropping any of it at the gaming tables. I'll knock your block off if I see you there."

"I'll knock my own block off if I see me there. Jase, I don't know how to thank—"

"Don't is right. Forget it."

"Do you have enough?"

"Me? Plenty. Don't worry about old Jase." Ramsey went to the door. "Well, see you."

Englander walked quickly to him and shook his hand again. On the way out, Ramsey played for a moment or two with the twins, who were rolling a couple of toy spaceships marked hyper-one and hyper-two across the floor and making anachronistic machine-gun noises with their lips. Sally Englander, a plump, young-home-maker type, beamed at Ramsey from the kitchen. Then he went out into the gathering dusk.

As usual on Irwadi, and particularly with the coming of night, it was bitterly cold. Sucker, Ramsey told himself. But he grinned. He felt good about what he'd done. With Stu sick, and with Sally and the kids, he'd done the only thing he could do. He still had almost twenty-five credits left. Maybe he really would have a lucky night at the tables. Maybe . . . heck, he'd been down-and-out before. A fugitive from Earth didn't have much choice sometimes. . . .

"Red sitteen," the croupier said indifferently. He was a short, heavy-set Sirian with a shock of scarlet hair, albino skin, and red eyes.

Ramsey watched his money being raked across the table. It wasn't his night, he told himself with a grim smile. He had only three credits left. If he risked them now, there wouldn't even be the temporary physical relief and release of a bottle of Irwadian brandy before hitting the sack.

Which was another thing, Ramsey thought. Hitting the sack. Ah yes, you filthy outworlder capitalist, hitting the sack. You owe that fish-eyed, scale-skinned Irwadian landlady the rent money, so you'd better wait until later, until much later, before sneaking back to your room.

He watched the gambling for another hour or so without risking his few remaining credits. After a while a well-dressed Irwadian, drunk and obviously slumming here in the Old Quarter, made his way over to the table. His body scales were a glossy dark green and he wore glittering, be-jeweled straps across his chest and an equally glittering, be-jeweled weapons belt. Aside from these, in the ap-

proved Irwadian fashion, he was quite naked. An anthropologist friend had once told Ramsey that once the Irwadians had worn clothing, but since the coming in great number of the outworlders they had stripped down, as though to prove how tough they were in being able to withstand the freezing climate of their native world. Actually, the Irwadian bodyscales were superb insulation, whether from heat or from cold.

"... Earthman watching me," the Irwadian in the be-jeweled straps said arrogantly, placing a fat roll of credits on the table.

"I'm sorry," Ramsey said. "Were you talking to me?"

"I thertainly wath," lisped the Irwadian, his eyes blazing with drunken hatred. "I thaid I won't have any Earthman thnooping over my thoulder while I gamble, not unleth he'th gambling too."

"Better tell that to your Security Police," Ramsey said coldly but not angrily. "I'm out of a job, so I don't have money to throw around. Go ahead and tell me—" with a little smile—"you think it was my idea."

The Irwadian looked up haughtily. Evidently he was looking for trouble, or could

not hold his liquor, or both. The frenzy of planetarization, Ramsey knew from bitter experience on other worlds, made irrational behavior like this typical. He studied the drunken Irwadian carefully. In all the time he'd spent on Irwadi, he'd never been able to tell a native's age by his green, scale-skinned, fish-eyed poker-face. But the glossy green scales covering face and body told Ramsey, along with the sturdy muscles revealed by the lack of clothing, that the Irwadian was in his prime, shorter than Ramsey by far, but wider across the shoulders and thicker through the barrel chest.

"You outworlderth have been deprething the thandard of living on Irwadi ever thince you came here," the Irwadian said. "All you ever brought wath poverty and your ditheath germth and more trouble than you could handle. I don't want your ththink near me. I'm trying to enjoy mythelf. Get out of here."

It was abruptly silent in the little gambling hall. Since the establishment catered to outworlders and was full of them, the silence, Ramsey thought, should have been both ominous and in his

favor. He looked around. Outworlders, yes. But not another Earthman present. He wondered if he was in for a fight. He shrugged, hardly caring. Maybe a fight was just what he needed, the way he felt.

"Get out of here," the Irwadian repeated. "You ththink."

Just then a Vegan girl, blue-skinned and fantastically wasp-waisted like all her kind, drifted over to Ramsey. He'd seen her around. He thought he recognized her. Maybe he'd even danced with her in the unit-a-dance halls reserved for humanoid outworlders.

"Are you nuts?" she said, hissing the words through her teeth and grabbing Ramsey's elbow. "Don't you know who that guy is?"

"No. Who?"

"He's Garr Symm, that's who."

Ramsey smiled at her without mirth. "Do I bow down in awe or run from here screaming? I never heard of Garr Symm."

"Oh you fool!" she whispered furiously. "Garr Symm is the brand new number one man of the Irwadi Security Police. Don't you read the 'casts?"

Before Ramsey could answer or adjust to his surprise, the Irwadian repeated:

"I'm telling you for the third time. Get out."

Ostentatiously, Ramsey reached into his cloak-pocket for a single credit bill and tossed it on the table.

"The denomination is not sufficient, sir," the albino Sirian croupier said indifferently. Ramsey had known it was not.

Garr Symm's face turned a darker green. The Vegan girl retreated from Ramsey's side in fright. Symm raised his hand and an Irwadian waiter brought over a drink in a purple stem glass with a filigree pattern of titanium, bowing obsequiously. Symm lurched with the glass toward Ramsey. "I'm telling you to go," he said in a loud voice.

Ramsey picked up his credit note but stood there. With a little sigh of drunken contentment, Garr Symm sloshed the contents of his stem glass in Ramsey's face.

The liquor stung Ramsey's eyes. Many of the other outworlders, neither Irwadian nor Earthmen, laughed nervously.

Ramsey wiped his eyes but otherwise did not move. He was in a rough spot and he knew it. The fact that their new Security Chief went out drunk at night with a chip on his shoulder was the Irwa-

dian government's affair, not Ramsey's. He'd been insulted before. An Earthman in the outworlds, particularly an Earthman fugitive who knew he dared not get into the kind of trouble that could bring the Earth consul to investigate, was used to insults. For Earth was the leading economic and military power of the galaxy, and the fact that Earth really tried to deal fairly with its galactic neighbors meant nothing. Earth, being top dog, was resented.

The thing which got Ramsey, though, was this Garr Symm. He had never heard of Garr Symm, and he thought he knew most of the big shots in the Irwadian Security Police by name. But there must have been a reason for his appointment. A government throwing off outworld influence had a reason for everything. So, why Garr Symm?

"You, Mith Vegan!" Garr Symm called suddenly. "You whithpered to the Earthman. What did you tell him?"

"Not to look for trouble," the Vegan girl said in a frightened voice.

"But what elth?"

"Honest, that's all."

"Come here, pleath."

Her blue skin all at once very pale, the Vegan girl

walked back toward Garr Symm. He leered at her quite drunkenly and took hold of her slender arm. "What did you tell him? For the latht time."

The girl whimpered: "You are hurting my arm."

Thoughts raced through Ramsey's mind. As an administrator, as an Irwadian public servant in a touchy job, Garr Symm, a drunkard, was obviously grossly incompetent. What other qualifications did he have which gave him the top Irwadian Security job? Ramsey didn't know. He sighed. The Vegan girl's mouth formed a rictus of pain. Ramsey had a hunch he was going to find out.

He said curtly: "Let go of her, Symm. She told me nothing that would interest you."

Garr Symm ignored him. The blue-skinned girl cried.

Ramsey grimaced and hit Garr Symm in the belly as hard as he could.

Symm thudded back against the table. It overturned with a crash and the Security Chief crashed down on top of it. There wasn't a sound in the gambling hall except Ramsey's sudden hard breathing, the Vegan girl's sniffing, and Garr Symm's noisy at-

tempts to get air into his lungs. Then Garr Symm gagged and was sick. He writhed in pain, still unable to breathe. His hands fluttered near his weapons belt.

"Come on," Ramsey told the Vegan girl. "We'd better get out of here." He took her arm. Dumbly she went with him. None of the outworlders there tried to stop them. Ramsey looked back at Garr Symm. The Irwadian was shaking his fist. He had finally managed to draw his m.g. gun, but the crowd of outworlders closed between them and there was no chance he could hit Ramsey or the girl. Retching, he had dirtied the glossy green scales of his chest.

"I'll get you," he vowed. "I'll get you."

Ramsey took the girl outside. It was very cold. "I'm so afraid," she said. "What will I do? What *can* I do?" She shook with fear.

"You got a place to sleep?"

"Y-yes, but I'm the only Vegan girl in Irwadi City. He'll find me. He'll find me when he's ready."

"O.K. Then come home with me."

"I—"

"For crying out loud, I don't look that lecherous; do I? We can't just stand here."

"I—I'm sorry. I'll go with you of course."

Ramsey took her hand again and they ran. The cold black Irwadian night swallowed them.

"So you live in the Old Quarter too," the Vegan girl said.

"Heck yeah. Did you expect a palace?"

Ramsey had a room, rent one Irwadi month in arrears, in a cold-water tenement near the river which demarked the Old and the New Quarters. The façade of the old building was dark now. His landlady was probably asleep, although you never could tell with that old witch. Ramsey knew it wouldn't be the first time she stayed up through half the night to await a delinquent tenant.

"I—I never went to a man's room before," the blue-skinned Vegan girl said. She was rather pretty in a slender, muscleless, big-eyed, female-helpless mode.

"You're a dance-hall girl, aren't you?"

"Still, I never spent the night in a man's—"

"What's the matter with you? You think we're going to spend the night here? Somebody over at those gambling tables will be able to iden-

tify me. Garr Symm'll be on his way before long."

"Then what are we going to do?" The girl was shivering with cold.

"Hide," Jason Ramsey said. "Somewhere. I just came back to get my things. There isn't much, but there's an old m.g. gun which we might need."

"But they'll find us, and—"

"You coming upstairs or will you wait out here and freeze to death in the cold?"

"I'm coming."

They went upstairs together, on tip-toe. Ramsey's room was on the third floor, with a besooted view of the industrial complex on the river by day. The narrow hall was dark and silent. Behind one of the closed doors an outworlder cried out in his sleep. Ramsey had to cup a hand over the Vegan girl's mouth so she wouldn't scream in empathic fear. He opened the door of his room, surprised that it was not locked. He thought he had left it locked.

At once he was wary. It was dark in the hall, just as dark in the room. He could see nothing. The door hinges squeaked.

"Come in, Captain Ramsey," a voice said. "I thought you would never get here."

He stood on the threshold,

uncertain. The voice had spoken not *Interstellar Coine*, but English. It had spoken English, without a foreign accent.

And it was a girl's voice.

Still, it could have been an elaborate trick. It was unlikely, but not impossible, that Garr Symm had learned Ramsey's identity already and had sent an operative here to await him. Ramsey and the Vegan girl had come on foot. It was a long walk.

"I'm armed," Ramsey lied. "Come over" here. Slowly. Don't put any lights on." He could feel the Vegan girl trembling next to him. Not able to understand English, she didn't know what was going on.

"You're armed," the unseen girl's voice said in crisp, amused English, "like I'm a six-legged Antarean spider-man. You have an m.g. gun, Ramsey. It's in this room. I have it. That's all you have. No, don't try to lie to me. I'm a telepath. I can read you. Come in and put the light on and shut the door. You may bring the girl with you if you want. Brother, is she ever radiating fear! It's practically drowning your own mind out."

The unseen girl wasn't kid-

ding, Ramsey knew. She could read minds. She had proved it to him. Which left him this choice: he could grab the Vegan girl's arm again and get the heck out of there, or do what the unseen Earth girl told him to do. He wanted that m.g. gun. He took the Vegan girl's hand and advanced over the threshold and closed the door and switched on the light.

The girl was sitting on the bed. She was an Earthgirl, all right. She had come in a toggle-cloak of green Irwadian fur, which was folded neatly at her side on the bed. Under it she wore a daring net halter of the type then fashionable on Earth but which had not yet taken over the outworlds. It left her shoulders bare and exposed a great deal of smooth, tawny skin through the net. Her firm breasts were cupped in two solid cones of black growing out of the net. Her midriff was bare to an inch or two below the navel. Her loins were covered by an abrevitog which formed a triangle in front and, Ramsey knew, would form one in back. Her long, well-formed legs were bare down to the mid-calf boots she wore. She had a beautiful body and had dressed so Ramsey couldn't miss

it. Her face was so provocatively beautiful that Ramsey just stood there staring at it—after he had taken in the rest of her. She wore her hair quite long. She seemed perfectly composed. In her right hand she held Ramsey's m.g. gun, but she wasn't pointing it at them.

She looked at the timid Vegan girl and smiled. "Oh, I am sorry, Captain Ramsey," she said. "I couldn't know, of course, you'd be coming home with—company."

"It isn't what you think it is," Ramsey said, surprised to find himself on the defensive. "The girl's in trouble. So'm I."

The Earthgirl laughed. "Already? You looked the type, but I thought it would take a little time."

"What do you want?" Ramsey said. They were speaking in English. The Vegan girl tugged at Ramsey's arm. She wanted to get out of there and hoped Ramsey would go with her. Abruptly the Earthgirl burst out laughing.

"What's so funny?" Ramsey demanded.

"You're little Vegan friend. I read her mind, Ramsey. She thinks I'm your wife. She thinks I'm mad at you for bringing her home."

"Then why don't you talk

in *Coine*," Ramsey said in the interstellar language, "and make her feel better? She might as well know I never saw you before in my life." He was annoyed.

The Vegan girl smiled timidly, taking hope.

"But you did," the beautiful Earthgirl said. "I was on the *Polaris* today, Captain. You were to be the pilot, until Interstellar Transfer here on Irwadi was planetarized."

"I didn't see you. Dressed like that I wouldn't have forgotten you."

"I wasn't dressed like this." The girl smiled, very sure of herself. "I read your mind when you came in. The costume's had the desired effect, I see. But you needn't broadcast your animal desires so blatantly."

"Nobody asked you to read my mind. Besides, you needn't broadcast your physical assets so blatantly."

"Touché," said the Earthgirl.

"Listen," Ramsey began. "We're in a jam. We're in a hurry."

"So you told me. I couldn't have wished for more. It looks like I didn't need this costume and its obvious inducements at all, if you're really in a jam."

"What the devil is that supposed to mean?"

"My name is Margot Dennison, Captain Ramsey. I have managed to buy an old starship, small and held together by spit and string and whatever the Irwadians use for prayer—"

"They're atheists," Ramsey said a little pointlessly. It was the girl. Darn her hide, she was beautiful! What did she expect? Looking at her, how could a man concentrate. . . .

"Hey!" Ramsey blurted suddenly. "Did you say Margot Dennison? The tri-di star?"

Margot Dennison smiled. "That's right," she said. "Stranded five hundred light years from nowhere, Captain Ramsey. With a ship. With money. In need of a hyper-space pilot. That's why I'm here, or didn't you guess?"

"I'm listening."

"Isn't it clear? I'll pay you to take me away from here."

"Where to?"

"Through hyper-space to Earth. Well?"

"I've been grounded. If I take you through hyper-space, I lose my license."

"You really don't believe that, do you? After the Irwadians grounded all of you without warning, and grounded all ships until they can

train a few more pilots. You don't really think I.T.S. would take your license away if you took a ship up and through hyper, do you? Under the circumstances? Especially since you're in a jam with a totalitarian government gone wild? Do you?"

Ramsey said abruptly: "I'm sorry. I can't take you to Sol System."

Margot Dennison smiled. It wasn't the kind of smile designed to make a man roll over on his back and wave all fours in the breeze. Margot Dennison didn't need that kind of smile.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said. "I read your mind, you see. Very well, Captain. If you're a fugitive from Earth—I assume Ramsey isn't your real name, by the way—you may take me through hyper to Centauri. That will be quite satisfactory. I will make my way from Centauri. Well?"

"Give me the gun," Ramsey said.

"My goodness, of course. I'm not trying to hold you up. Here." She got up from the bed for the first time and walked toward them. She had firm, long legs, and used them well. She was utterly lovely and although part of it was probably her professional know-how, she made you for-

get that. She was the most attractive girl, Earth or out-world, Ramsey had seen in years.

Ramsey took the gun. Their hands met. Ramsey leaned forward quickly and kissed her on the lips. He was still holding the Vegan girl's slender arm, though. She tried to run away but couldn't. Margot Dennison returned the kiss for an instant, to show Ramsey that when she really wanted to return it, if she ever really would, she would pack the same kind of libidinal vitality in her responses as she did in her appearance; then she stood coldly, no longer responsive, until Ramsey stepped back.

"Maybe I was asking for it," she said. "I was prepared for that—and more. But it isn't necessary now, is it? My gosh, Ramsey! Will you please close that mind of yours? You make a girl blush."

"Then put on your cloak," Ramsey said, and, really blushing this time, she did so.

She said: "I'm prepared to pay you one thousand credits; what do you say?"

"I say it must be a pretty important appointment you have on Centauri."

"Earth, Captain Ramsey. I'm settling for Centauri. Well?"

"I'll take you," Ramsey said, "if this girl comes too."

Margot Dennison looked at the frightened Vegan girl and smiled. "So it's like that," she said.

"It isn't like anything."

Ramsey packed a few things in an expanduffle and the three of them hurried through the doorway and down stairs. The cold dark night awaiting them with a fierce howling wind and the first flurries of snow from the north.

"Where to?" Ramsey hollered above the wind.

"My place," Margot Dennison told him, and they ran.

Margot Dennison had a large apartment in Irwadi City's New Quarter. This surprised Ramsey, for not many outworlders lived there. That night, though, he was too tired to think about it. He vaguely remembered a couch for himself, a separate room for the Vegan girl, another for Margot Dennison. He slept like a log without dreaming.

He awoke with anxious hands fluttering at his shoulder. Opening one sleepy eye, he saw the Vegan girl. He saw daylight through a window but said, "Gmph! Middle of the night."

The Vegan girl said: "She's gone."

Ramsey came awake all at once, springing to his feet fully dressed and flinging aside his cloak, which he'd used as a blanket. "Margot!" he called.

"She's gone," the Vegan girl repeated. "When I awoke she wasn't here. The door—"

Ramsey ran to the door. It was a heavy plastic irising door. It was locked and naturally would not respond to the whorl patterns of Ramsey's thumb.

"So now we're prisoners," Ramsey said. "I don't get it."

"At least there's food in the kitchen."

"All right. Let's eat."

There were two windows in the room, but when Ramsey looked out he saw they were at least four stories up. They'd just have to wait for Margot Dennison.

It took the Vegan girl some time to prepare the unfamiliar Earth-style food with which Margot Dennison's kitchen was stocked. Ramsey used the time to prowl around the apartment. It was furnished in Sirian-archaic, a mode of furniture too feminine to suit Ramsey's tastes. But then, the uni-sexual Sirians, of course, often ca-

tered to their own feminine taste.

Ramsey found nothing in Margot Dennison's apartment which indicated she had done any acting on Irwadi, and that surprised him, for he'd assumed she had plied her trade here as elsewhere. He felt a little guilty about his snooping, then changed his mind when he remembered that Margot had locked them in.

In one of the slide compartments of what passed for a bureau in Sirian-archaic, he found a letter. Since it was the only piece of correspondence in the apartment, it might be important to Margot Dennison, thought Ramsey. And if it were important to her. . . .

Ramsey opened the letter and read it. Dated five Earth months before, it ran:

My darling Margot: By the time you read this I shall be dead. Ironical, isn't it? Coming so close—with death in the form of an incurable cancer intervening.

As you know, Margot, I always wished for a son but never had one. You'll have to play that role, I'm afraid, as you always have. Here is the information I told you I would write down. Naturally, if you

intend to do anything about it, you'll guard it with your life.

Apparently the hyper-space pattern from Irwadi to Earth is the one I was looking for. The proto-men, if I may be bold enough to call them that, first left hyper-space at that point, perhaps a million, perhaps five million, Earth years ago. I don't have to tell you what this means, my child. I've already indicated it to you previously. It suffices to remind you that, in what science has regarded as the most amazing coincidence in the history of the galaxy, humanoid types sprang up on some three thousand stellar worlds simultaneously between one and five million years ago. I say simultaneously although there is the possibility of a four million year lag: indications are, however, that one date would do quite well for all the worlds.

Proto-man was tremendously ahead of us in certain sciences, naturally. For example, each humanoid type admirably fits the evolutionary pattern on its particular planet. The important point, Margot, is the simultaneity of the events: it means that proto-man left hyper-space,

his birth-place, and peopled the man-habitable worlds of the galaxy at a single absolute instance in time. This would clearly be impossible if the thousands of journeys involved any duration. Therefore, it can only be concluded that they were journeys which somehow negated the temporal dimension. In other words, instant travel across the length and breadth of the galaxy!

Whoever re-discovers proto-man's secret, needless to say, will be the most influential, the most powerful, man in the galaxy. Margot, I thought that man would be me. It won't be now.

But it can be you, Margot. It is my dying wish that you continue my work. Let nothing stop you. Nothing. Remember this, though: I cannot tell you what to expect when you reach the original home of proto-man. In all probability the whole race has perished, or we'd have heard of them since. But I can't be sure of that. I can't be sure of anything. Perhaps proto-man, like some deistic god, became disinterested in the Milky Way Galaxy for reasons we'll never understand. Perhaps he still exists, in hyper-space.

(Continued on page 104)

HOME IS WHERE YOU LEFT IT

By ADAM CHASE

ONLY the shells of deserted mud-brick houses greeted Steve Cantwell when he reached the village.

He poked around in them for a while. The desert heat was searing, parching, and

How black is the blackest treachery? Is the most callous traitor entitled to mercy? Steve pondered these questions. His decision? That at times the villain should possibly be spoken of as a hero.

the Sirian sun gleamed balefully off the blades of Steve's unicopter, which had brought him from Oasis City, almost five hundred miles away. He had remembered heat from his childhood here on Sirius'



The chance of mass slaughter

second planet with the Earth colony, but not heat like this. It was like a magnet drawing all the moisture out of his body.

He walked among the buildings, surprise and perhaps sadness etched on his gaunt, weather-beaten face. Childhood memories flooded back: the single well from which all the families drew their water, the mud-brick house, hardly different from the others and just four walls and a roof now, in which he'd lived with his aunt after his parents had been killed in a *Kumaji* raid,

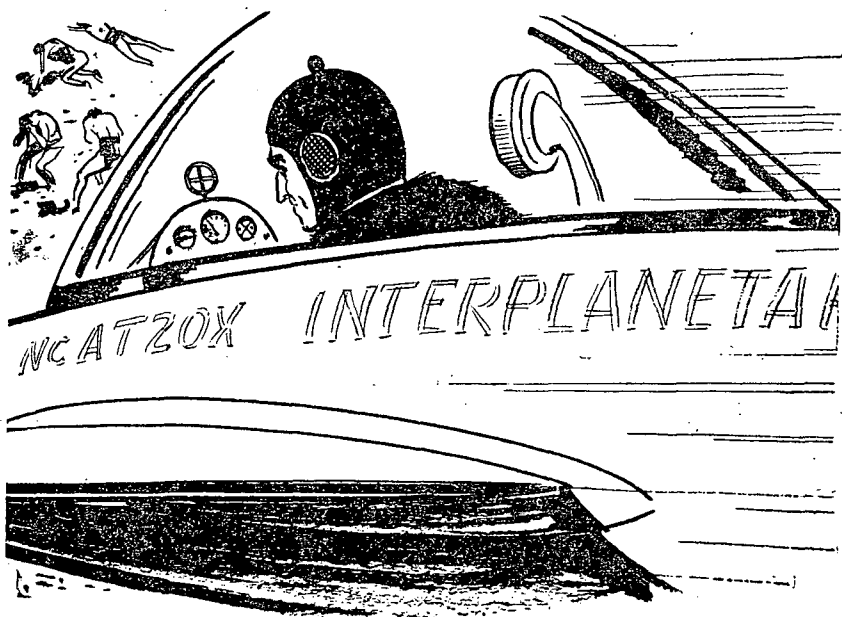
the community center where he'd spent his happiest time as a boy.

He went to the well and hoisted up a pailful of water. The winch creaked as he remembered. He ladled out the water, suddenly very thirsty, and brought the ladle to his lips.

He hurled the ladle away. The water was bitter. Not brackish.

Poisoned.

He spat with fury, then kneeled and stuffed his mouth with sand, almost gagging. After a while he spat out the



was their eternal nightmare.

sand too and opened his canteen and rinsed his mouth. His lips and mouth were paralyzed by contact with the poison. He walked quickly across the well-square to his aunt's house. Inside, it was dim but hardly cooler. Steve was sweating, the saline sweat making him blink. He scowled, not understanding. The table was set in his aunt's house. A coffeepot was on the stove and last night's partially-consumed dinner still on the table.

The well had been poisoned, the town had been deserted on the spur of the moment, and Steve had returned to his boyhood home from Earth—too late for anything.

He went outside into the square. A lizard was sunning itself and staring at him with lidless eyes. When he moved across the square, the lizard scurried away.

"Earthman!" a quavering voice called.

Steve ran toward the sound. In the scant shadow of the community center, a Kumaji was resting. He was a withered old man, all skin and bones and sweat-stiffened tunic, with enormous red-rimmed eyes. His purple skin, which had been blasted by the merciless sun, was almost black.

Steve held the canteen to his lips and watched his throat working almost spasmodically to get the water down. After a while Steve withdrew the canteen and said:

"What happened here?"

"They're gone. All gone."

"Yes, but what happened?"

"The Kumaji—"

"You're Kumaji."

"This is my town," the old man said. "I lived with the Earthmen. Now they're gone."

"But you stayed here—"

"To die," the old man said, without self-pity. "I'm too old to flee, too old to fight, too old for anything but death. More water."

Steve gave him another drink. "You still haven't told me what happened." Actually, though, Steve could guess. With the twenty-second century Earth population hovering at the eleven billion mark, colonies were sought everywhere. Even on a parched desert wasteland like this. The Kumaji tribesmen had never accepted the colony as a fact of their life on the desert, and in a way Steve could not blame them. It meant one oasis less for their own nomadic sustenance. When Steve was a boy, Kumaji raids were frequent. At

school on Earth and Luna he'd read about the raids, how they'd increased in violence, how the Earth government, so far away and utterly unable to protect its distant colony, had suggested withdrawal from the Kumaji desert settlement, especially since a colony could exist there under only the most primitive conditions, almost like the purple-skinned Kumaji natives themselves.

"When did it happen?" Steve demanded.

"Last night." It was now midafternoon. "Three folks died," the Kumaji said in his almost perfect English, "from the poisoning of the well. The well was the last straw. The colonists had no choice. They had to go, and go fast, taking what little water they had left in the houses."

"Will they try to walk all the way through to Oasis City?" Oasis City, built at the confluence of two underground rivers which came to the surface there and flowed the rest of the way to the sea above ground, was almost five hundred miles from the colony. Five hundred miles of trackless sands and hundred-and-thirty-degree heat. . . .

"They have to," the old man said. "And they have to hurry. Men, women and chil-

dren. The Kumaji are after them."

Steve felt irrational hatred then. He thought it would help if he could find some of the nomadic tribesmen and kill them. It might help the way he felt, he knew, but it certainly wouldn't help the fleeing colonists, trekking across a parched wilderness—to the safety of Oasis City—or death.

"Come on," Steve said, making up his mind. "The unicopter can hold two in a pinch."

"You're going after them?"

"I've got to. They're my people. I've been away too long."

"Say, you're young Cantwell, aren't you? Now I remember."

"Yes, I'm Steve Cantwell."

"I'm not going anyplace, young fellow."

"But you can't stay here, without any good water to drink, without—"

"I'm staying," the old man said, still without self-pity, just matter-of-factly. "The Earth folks have no room for me and I can't blame 'em. The Kumaji'll kill me for a renegade, I figure. I lived a good, long life. I've no regrets. Go after your people, young fellow. They'll need every extra

strong right arm they can get. You got any weapons?"

"No," Steve said.

"Too bad. Well, good-bye and good luck."

"But you can't—"

"Oh, I'm staying. I want to stay. This is my home. It's the only home I'll ever have. Good luck, young fellow."

Slowly, Steve walked to his unicopter. It was nothing more than a small metal disk on which to stand, and a shaft with four turbo-blades. It could do sixty miles an hour at an elevation of two thousand feet.

Steve turned the little turbo-jet engine over, then on impulse ran back to the old man and gave him his canteen, turning away before it could be refused and striding quickly back to the unicopter and getting himself airborne without looking at the deserted village or the old man again.

The old man's voice called after him: "Tell the people . . . hurry . . . Kumaji looking for them to kill . . . desert wind ought to wipe out their trail . . . but hurry . . ."

The voice faded into the faint rushing sound of the hot desert wind. Steve gazed down on bare sun-blasted rock, on rippled dunes, on

hate-haze. He circled wider and wider, seeking his people.

Hours later he spotted the caravan in the immensity of sand and wasteland. He brought the unicopter down quickly, with a rush of air and a whine of turbojets. He alighted in the sand in front of the slow-moving column. It was like something out of Earth's Middle East—and Middle Ages. They had even imported camels for their life here on the Sirian desert, deciding the Earth camel was a better beast of burden than anything the Sirius II wastelands had to offer. They walked beside the great-humped beasts of burden, the animals piled high with the swaying baggage of their belongings. They moved through the sands with agonizing slowness. Already, after only one day's travel, Steve could see that some of the people were spent and exhausted and had to ride on camelback. They had gone perhaps fifteen miles, with almost five hundred to go across searing desert, the Kumaji seeking them. . . .

"Hullo!" Steve shouted, and a man armed with an atorifle came striding clumsily through the sand toward him. "Cantwell's the name," Steve said. "I'm one of you."

Bleak hostility in his face, the man approached. "Cantwell. Yeah, I remember you. Colony wasn't good enough for young Steve Cantwell. Oh, no. Had to go off to Earth to get himself educated. What are you doing here now on that fancy aircraft of yours, coming to crow at our wake?"

The bitterness surprised Steve. He recognized the man now as Tobias Whiting, who had been the Colony's most successful man when Steve was a boy. Except for his bitterness and for the bleak self-pity and defeat in his eyes, the years had been good to Tobias Whiting. He was probably in his mid-forties now, twenty years Steve's senior, but he was well-muscled, his flesh was solid, his step bold and strong. He was a big muscular man with a craggy, handsome face. In ten years he had hardly changed at all, while Steve Cantwell, the boy, had become Steve Cantwell the man. He had been the Colony's official trader with the Kumajis, and had grown rich—by colony standards—at his business. Now, Steve realized, all that was behind him, and he could only flee with the others—either back to the terribly crowded Earth or on in search of a new colony on

some other outworld, if they could get the transportation. Perhaps that explained his bitterness.

"So you've come back, eh? You sure picked a time, Cantwell."

The refugees were still about a quarter of a mile off, coming up slowly. They hardly seemed to be moving at all. "Is my aunt all right?" Steve said. She was the only family he remembered.

Tobias Whiting shook his head slowly. "I hate to be the one to tell you this. Brace yourself for a shock. Your aunt was one of those who died from the poisoned water last night."

For a long moment, Steve said nothing. The only emotion he felt was pity—pity for the hard life his aunt had lived, and the hard death. Sadness would come later, if there was to be a time for sadness.

The caravan reached them then. The first person Steve saw was a girl. She wore the shroud-like desert garment and her face—it would be a pretty face under other circumstances, Steve realized—was etched with lines of fatigue. Steve did not recognize her. "Who is he, Dad?" the girl said.

"Young Cantwell. Remember?"

So this was Mary Whiting, Steve thought. Why, she'd been a moppet ten years ago! How old? Ten years old maybe. The years crowded him suddenly. She was a woman now. . . .

"Steve Cantwell?" Mary said. "Of course I remember. Hello, Steve. I—I'm sorry you had to come back at a time like this. I'm sorry about your aunt. If there's anything I can do . . ."

Steve shook his head, then shook the hand she offered him. She was a slim, strong girl with a firm handshake. Her concern for him at a time like this was little short of amazing, especially since it was completely genuine.

He appreciated it.

Tobias Whiting said: "Shame of it is, Cantwell, some of us could get along with the Kumaji. I had a pretty good business here, you know that." He looked with bitterness at the dusty file of refugees. "But I never got a credit out of it. Wherever we wind up, my girl and I will be poor again. We could have been rich."

Steve asked, "What happened to all your profits?"

"Tied up with a Kumaji moneylender, but thanks to

what happened I'll never see it again."

Mary winced, as if her father's words and his self-pity were painful to her. Then others came up and a few minutes were spent in back-pounding and hand-shaking as some of the men who had been boys with Steve came up to recognize and be recognized. Their greeting was warm, as Tobias Whiting's had been cool. Despite the knowledge of what lay behind all of them, and what still lay ahead, it was a little like homecoming.

But Steve liked Mary Whiting's warm, friendly smile best of all. It was comforting and reassuring.

Three days later, Tobias Whiting disappeared.

The caravan had been making no more than ten or fifteen miles a day. Their water supply was almost gone but on the fourth day they hoped to reach an oasis in the desert. Two of the older folks had died of fatigue. A third was critically ill and there was little that could be done for him. The food supply was running short, but they could always slaughter their camels for food and make their way to Oasis City, still four hundred and some miles away,

with nothing but the clothes on their backs.

And then, during the fourth night, Tobias Whiting disappeared, taking Steve's unicopter. A sentry had heard the low muffled whine of the turbojets during the night and had seen the small craft take off, but had assumed Steve had taken it up for some reason. Each day Steve had done so, reconnoitering for signs of the Kumaji.

"But why?" someone asked. "Why?"

At first there was no answer. Then a woman whose husband had died the day before said: "It's no secret Whiting has plenty of money—with the Kumaji."

None of them looked at Mary. She stood there defiantly, not saying anything, and Steve squeezed her hand.

"Now, wait a minute," one of Whiting's friends said.

"Wait, nothing." This was Jeremy Gort, who twice had been mayor of the colony. "I know how Whiting's mind works. He slaved all his life for that money, that's the way he'll see it. Cantwell, didn't you say the Kumaji were looking for us, to kill us?"

"That's what I was told," Steve said.

"All right," Gort went on

relentlessly. "Then this is what I figure must have happened. Whiting got to brooding over his lost fortune and finally decided he had to have it. So, he went off at night in Cantwell's 'copter, determined to get it. Only catch is, folks, if I know the Kumaji, they won't just give it to him—not by a long sight."

"No?" someone asked.

"No sir. They'll trade. For our location. And if Whiting went off like that without even saying good-bye to his girl here, my guess is he'll make the trade." His voice reflected some bitterness.

Mary went to Gort and slapped his face. The elderly man did not even blink. "Well," he asked her gently, "did your pa tell you he was going?"

"N-no," Mary said. There were tears in her eyes, but she did not cry.

Gort turned to Steve. "Cantwell, can he get far in that 'copter?"

Steve shook his head. "Ten or fifteen miles is all. Almost out of fuel, Mr. Gort. You saw how I took her up for only a quick mile swing each day. He won't get far."

"He'll crash in the desert?"

"Crash or crash-land," Steve said.

Mary sobbed, and bit her lip, and was silent.

"We've got to stop him," Gort said. "And fast. If he gets to the Kumaji, they'll send down a raiding party and we'll be finished. We could never fight them off without the protection of our village. Near as I can figure, there's a Kumaji base fifty miles due north of here. Whiting knows it too, so that's where he'll be going, I figure. Can't spare more than a couple of men to look for him, though, in case the Kumaji find us—or are led to us—and attack."

Steve said, "I should have taken something out of the 'copter every night, so it couldn't start. I'll go."

Mary came forward boldly. "I have to go. He's my father. If he crashed out there, he may be hurt. He may be—dying."

Gort looked at her. "And if he's trying to sell us out to the Kumajis?"

"Then—then I'll do whatever Steve asks me to. I promise."

"That's good enough for me," Steve said.

A few minutes later, armed with atorifles and their share of the food and water that was left, Steve and Mary set out northward across the

sand while the caravan continued east. Fear of what they might find mounted.

The first night, they camped in the lee of low sandhills. The second night they found a small spring with brackish but drinkable water. On the third day, having covered half the distance to the Kumaji settlement, they began to encounter Kumaji patrols, on foot or *thlotback*, the six-legged desert animals running so swiftly over the sands and so low to the ground that they almost seemed to be gliding. Steve and Mary hardly spoke. Talk was unnecessary. But slowly a bond grew between them. Steve liked this slim silent girl who had come out here with him risking her life although she must have known deep in her heart that her father had almost certainly decided to turn traitor in order to regain his fortune.

On the fourth day, they spotted the unicopter from a long way off and made their way toward it. It had come much further than Steve had expected. With sinking heart he realized that Tobias Whiting, if he escaped the crash-landing without injury, must surely have reached the Kumaji encampment by now.

"It doesn't seem badly damaged," Mary said.

The platform had buckled slightly, the 'copter was tilted over, one of the rotors twisted, its end buried in sand. Tobias Whiting wasn't there.

"No," Steve said. "It's hardly damaged at all. Your father got out of it all right."

"To go—to them?"

"I think so, Mary. I don't want to pass judgment until we're sure. I'm sorry."

"Oh, Steve! Steve! What will we do? What *can* we do?"

"Find him, if it isn't too late. Come on."

"North?"

"North."

"And if by some miracle we find him?"

Steve said nothing. The answer—capture or death—was obvious. But you couldn't tell that to a traitor's daughter, could you?

As it turned out, they did not find Tobias Whiting through their own efforts. Half an hour after setting out from the unicopter, they were spotted by a roving band of Kumajis, who came streaking toward them on their *thlots*. Mary raised her atorife, but Steve struck the barrel aside. "They'd kill us," he said. "We can only surrender."

They were hobbled and led painfully across the sand.

They were taken that way to a small Kumaji encampment, and thrust within a circular tent.

Tobias Whiting was in there.

"Mary!" he cried. "My God! Mary . . ."

"We came for you, Dad," she said coldly. "To stop you. To . . . to kill you if necessary."

"Mary . . ."

"Oh, Dad, why did you do it? Why?"

"We couldn't start all over again, could we? You have a right to live the sort of life I planned for you. You . . ."

"Whiting," Steve said, "did you tell them yet?"

"No. No, I haven't. I have information to trade, sure. But I want to make sure it's going to the right people. I want to get our . . ."

"Dad! Our money, and all those deaths?"

"It doesn't matter now. I—I had changed my mind, Mary. Truly. But now, now that you're a prisoner, what if I don't talk? Don't you see, they'll torture you. They'll make you talk. And that way—we get nothing. I couldn't stand to see them hurt you."

"They can do—what they think they have to do. I'll tell them nothing."

"You won't have to," Whiting said. "I'll tell them when we reach the larger settlement. They're taking us there tomorrow, they told me."

"Then we've got to get out of here tonight," Steve said.

The low sun cast the shadow of their guard against the *thlotskin* wall of their tent. He was a single man, armed with a long, pike-like weapon. When darkness came, if the guard were not increased. . . .

They were brought a pasty gruel for their supper, and ate in silence and distaste, ate because they needed the strength. Mary said, "Dad, I don't want you to tell them anything. Dad, please. If you thought you were doing it for me . . ."

"I've made up my mind," Tobias Whiting said.

Mary turned to Steve, in despair. "Steve," she said. "Steve. Do—whatever you have to do. I—I'll understand."

Steve didn't answer her. Wasn't Whiting right now? he thought. If Steve silenced him, wouldn't the Kumaji torture them for the information? Steve could stand up to it perhaps—but he couldn't stand to see them hurt Mary. He'd talk if they did that. . . .

Then silencing Whiting wasn't the answer. But the

Kumajis had one willing prisoner and two unwilling ones. They knew that. If the willing one yelled for help but the yelling was kept to a minimum so only one guard, the man outside, came. . . .

Darkness in the Kumaji encampment.

Far off, a lone tribesman singing a chant old as the desert.

"Are you asleep?" Mary asked.

"No," Steve said.

"Dad is. Listen to the way he's breathing—like a baby. As if—as if he wasn't going to betray all our people. Oh, I hate him, I hate him!"

Steve crawled to where the older man was sleeping. Tobias Whiting's voice surprised him. "I'm not asleep.

I was thinking. I—"

"I'm going to kill you," Steve said very softly, and sprang at Whiting. He paused, though. It was a calculated pause, and Whiting cried out as Steve had hoped he would. Then his hands found the older man's throat and closed there—not to kill him but to keep him from crying out again.

Sand stirred, the tentflap lifted, and a bulky figure rushed inside. Steve got up, met him halfway, felt the

jarring contact of their bodies. The pike came up dimly in the darkness, the point scraping against Steve's ribs as the guard lunged awkwardly. Steve's fingers sought the thick-muscled neck, clamped there—squeezing.

The guard writhed. His feet drummed the sand. With one hand he stabbed out wildly with the unwieldy pike. There was a cry from Mary and the guard managed a low squawking noise. Outside, the rest of the camp seemed undisturbed. There was death in Steve's strong tightening fingers. There had to be death there. Death for the Kumaji guard—or death for the fleeing Earthmen, who had lost one colony and must seek another.

They fell together on the sand, the guard still struggling. Steve couldn't release his throat to grab the pike. The guard stabbed out awkwardly, blindly with it, kicking up sand. Then Tobias Whiting moaned, but Steve hardly heard him.

When the guard's legs stopped drumming, Steve released him. The man was either dead or so close to death that he would be out for hours. Steve had never killed a man before, had never

in violence and with intent to kill attacked a man. . . .

"Steve!"

It was Mary, calling his name and crying.

"It's Dad. Dad was—hit. The pike, a wild stab. He's hit bad—"

Steve crawled over to them. It was very dark. He could barely make out Tobias Whiting's pain-contorted face.

"My stomach," Whiting said, gasping for breath. "The pain . . ."

Steve probed with his hands, found the wound. Blood was rushing out. He couldn't stop it and he knew it and he thought Whiting knew it too. He touched Mary's hand, and held it. Mary sobbed against him, crying softly.

"You two . . ." Whiting gasped. "You two . . . Mary, Mary girl. Is—he—what you want?"

"Yes, Dad. Oh, yes!"

"You can get her out of here, Cantwell?"

"I think so," Steve said.

Then go. Go while you can. I'll tell them—due south. The Earthmen are heading due south. They'll go—south. They won't find the caravan. You'll—all—get away. If it's—what you want, Mary."

She leaned away from Steve, kissing her father. She

asked Steve: "Isn't there anything we can do for him?"

Steve shook his head. "But he's got to live long enough to tell them, to deceive them."

"I'll live long enough," Whiting said, and Steve knew then that he would. "Luck to—all of you. From a—very foolish—man . . ."

Steve took Mary's hand and pulled her out into the hot, dark, wind-blown night. He carried the dead Kumaji's pike and they slipped across the sand to where the *thlots* were hobbled for the night. He hardly remembered the rest of it. There was violence and death, but necessary death. He killed a man with the pike, and unhobbled one of the *thlots*. The animal screamed and two more Kumajis came sleepily through the night to see what was the matter. With the long edge of the pike's blade he decapitated one of them. He slammed the shaft of the weapon across the other's face, probably breaking his jaw. The camp was in a turmoil. In the darkness he flung Mary on the *thlot's* bare back in front

of him, and they glided off across the sand.

Pursuit was disorganized—and unsuccessful. It was too dark for effective pursuit, as Steve had hoped it would be. They rode swiftly all night and continued riding with the dawn. They could have gone in any direction. The wind-driven sand would obliterate their trail.

Two days later they reached the caravan. As they rode up, Mary said, "Steve, do you have to tell them?"

"We can tell them this," Steve said. "Your father died a hero's death, sending the Kumajis off in the wrong direction."

"And not—not what he'd planned to do at first."

"No. We'll tell them that was his intention all the while. A man can make a mistake, can't he?"

"I love you, Steve. I love you."

Then they rode down on the caravan. Somehow Steve knew they would all reach Oasis City in safety.

With Mary he would find a new world out in the vastness of space.

THE END

POPULAR

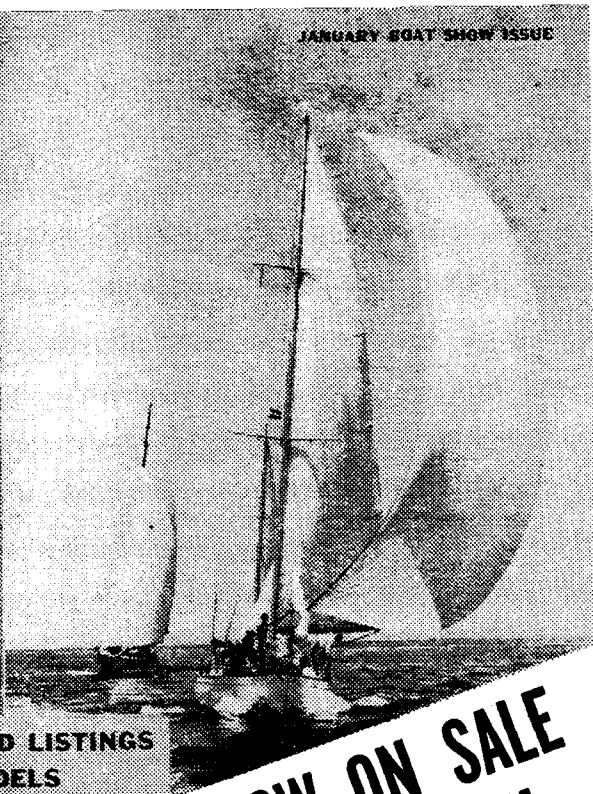
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We journey to far places, driven on by ideals. We fight for lost causes, sacrificing our lives because the things we fight for seem worthwhile. But are we right? Are they worth being killed over? Perhaps. Then again, maybe we'll know better—

The Next Time We Die

By ROBERT MOORE WILLIAMS

NOW in the nooning, with the sun high overhead and the shadows huddling dispiritedly at their sides, the threat that existed in this wild desert was completely invisible.

The girl, Nora Martin, said, "What I don't understand is why we were so

stupid as to come here in the first place. We could have stayed on Earth and had homes and families." Becoming conscious of what she had said, she hastily corrected herself. "I mean, each of us could have had a home and a family."

Pike McLean shifted the muzzle of the Rangeley just

a trifle, adjusting it so that the cross hairs in the periscope sight covered the exact spot where he expected, and hoped, the next native would appear. He tried to dig the sand out of his eyes. Since he had sand on his hands, this only got more of the gritty particles into his eyes. He wished fervidly for a deep satisfying breath of the thick muggy air of Earth before he died.

"This air, there's not anything to it," he muttered.

The girl glanced sharply at him. She had eyes that were as blue as the skies of Earth on a sunny day. The dirt on her nose made her look human. At this moment, the eyes had anger in them. Back of the anger were unshed tears.

"Did you hear what I said?" she repeated.

McLean shifted his long body so that it lay a little lower in the depression in the sand. "I guess you came here because you're an archeologist and you're getting paid to examine ruins. I came here because I'm a roustabout who is supposed to be able to do anything, which is what I'm getting paid for." He paused and removed an offending grain of sand from his right

eyelid. "Dying is not much," he continued. "Why are you so frazzled about it? It doesn't even hurt, when you really get to it, that is."

"You talk as if you have died before!"

"Why, I have," he answered, surprise in his voice. "Hundreds of times. Since we first crawled out on the mud flats and grew feet and left our gills behind us, that's a long time. We've been dying ever since, that's for sure. And probably for a much longer time."

"I thought you were talking about reincarnation," the astonished archeologist said.

"So I was," the roustabout answered. "They're only different approaches and aspects of the same problem. We reincarnate in order to take another crack at the puzzle of evolution. Some day we'll solve it! Then we will fall heir to the farther stars instead of just this little old duck pond of a solar system."

"You sound very sure of yourself. What proof—"

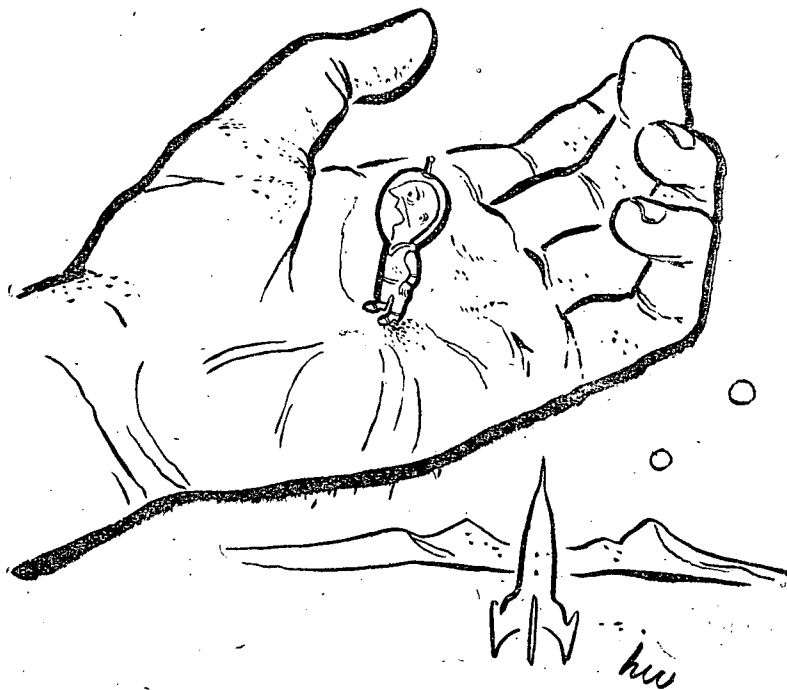
"It's in the book," McLean answered. "We're *homo sapiens*. And that means something. The mud flats didn't stop us. We crawled off of them and on to the high ground and into the forests and overran a planet. The

atom bomb didn't hold us up too long, even when we got to using it on each other. Where in all that space—" His hand swept upward in an arc that included all the vast expanse of stars dimly seen here on this world even at high noon. "—is anything that can stop us, when we can keep coming back to take another crack at the problem? Any problem, I don't care what it is, can be solved if we can keep working at it long

enough!" Enthusiasm sounded in his voice, then faded out. He drew his hand down. Two of the fingers were missing.

McLean stared at the ooze of blood and plasma and set his lips against the pain. "That damned needle ray can sure knock a hunk out of a man," he said.

"Oh, Pike, why did you have to be so careless!" Sliding the pack from her back, she opened it. Taking great



"I said we've come from Earth to liberate you!"

care not to get her head above the edge of the hole, she opened the first-aid kit and applied antiseptics and bandages to the stumps of the two fingers. Alternately she scolded and then soothed him.

"You do that real well," he said, approvingly. "You should have been a mama, instead of an archeologist, and raised a whole slather of kids, so you could bandage all their cuts and pat away all their bruises."

A longing as deep as the seas of Earth showed in her blue eyes. "That—that was what I wanted. But I got sidetracked into a profession." The longing was washed away in a film of sudden tears.

McLean closed his lips even tighter. He applied one eye to the sight of the Rangeley, now adjusted to function as a periscope. Level and apparently free of all danger, the grim red sands swept away to the low mountains in the distance. The air was so clear and so thin that he could even see the ruins of the city that had been their destination when they had left the ship. The city was a vast mass of tumbled masonry sprawled on treeless, forgotten hills. On the sand nothing moved. Yet death was there in front

of him, and his eye had certainly passed over it.

"The nice little foxes are all in their nice little holes," he said.

The girl made a wan effort to smile. "How are your fingers? I mean, do they hurt much?"

"They feel like I don't have them." Grinning at his own joke, McLean swung the sight of the Rangeley around to their desert buggy. The over-size tires loomed up like huge rubber doughnuts sprouting mysteriously out of the desert sand. The door of the car was invitingly open.

"It's only a quarter of a mile," he said. "We could sprint that far. But how could we run at all without legs?"

"We have legs," the girl said eagerly. "Let's try to make the car."

"We wouldn't have 'em, if we jumped out of this hole and started running. The little foxes have sharp teeth."

"Oh." Her voice dropped as the color faded from her eyes. "Then what are we going to do?"

"Stay here and hope they send out another desert car from the ship looking for us. If we don't return in a reasonable time, they may become curious about us."

"And if they don't come?"

"We'll try to out-fox the foxes."

"If we had a radio—"

"We do, but it's in our buggy. If we were there, we wouldn't need a radio. The dur-steel body of the car would stop the beam from that needle gun. How the hell does it happen that wild tribesmen, with no science and no industry, living here in a desert, have a weapon like that needle ray gun?"

"When they built their city there, they weren't desert tribesmen," the girl explained. "They were going somewhere, then, and they had science and at least light industry, and skilled workers. When they came back to the desert, they left everything behind them except their weapons. A primitive will always choose a weapon over anything else. He will value it as he values his life, because that is what it is."

"Why did they come back to a desert?"

"That's one thing we expected to discover in their ruined city, Pike." The girl's voice took on the patient tone of the expert instructing the amateur. "War with a neighboring tribe, in which they were defeated, might have been the reason. Change in climate might have been a

factor. Perhaps there were other reasons too, famine, pestilence. They started up, then went back. This has happened so often that it seems to me that the seeds of decay always sprout at the same time as the seeds of greatness."

"I wish I were an archaeologist and a philosopher, and understood all those things," McLean said, longingly.

"You are a man, which is more important."

"Do you mean *male*?"

"No. Man. *M-a-n*." She spelled the word for him. "Man. The highest level reached by the life force on Earth, to date. Or in the Solar System, as we know it."

"Oh, you mean the top of the heap," McLean said. "Sure, we know that. But the little foxes hiding in their nice little holes don't know it. They don't think that being a man is so much." A thin sparkle of light flickered through the air above his head as he spoke. He had the impression that a crackling sound went with the death beam, like the rustle of static in space. "See! That's what they think of us! Targets!"

The girl dodged downward. McLean advised her not to be a sissie and turned his atten-

tion to the sight of the Rangeley. Nothing was in sight. This did not surprise him. He had not expected to see anything except sand. "I betcha I'm looking right at two or three of those devils and not seeing them," he grumbled.

"They are adept at protective coloration," the girl said. "Let me look."

She applied her eye to the scope of the Rangeley, moving it on its mounting so that it swept across the sand. "There's one!" she said, sudden excitement in her voice.

"Where?" McLean demanded, pushing her aside and put his eye to the scope.

"Right where I have the sight centered. Can't you see that little bulge? Right there." She started to stand up and point.

McLean jerked her backward and shoved her face into the sand. "Don't get so excited that you start to stand up," he growled. Light sparkled through the air above them.

"I forgot," the girl said, meekly. "Let me get my head up. You've got my nose and mouth full of sand."

"Out here, you only forget once," the roustabout said, releasing her. "I still don't see anything," he said, peering through the scope. He

moved aside as she pushed at his shoulder.

Again she studied the terrain. Making a minute adjustment of the sight, she pulled the trigger. The Rangeley burped softly—it was a gas operated gun—then three quick explosions took place out on the desert where the explosive pellets hit. A wild yell followed. McLean got his eye to the sight in time to see a tribesman spin crazily within fifty feet of them. The fellow turned one last cartwheel, then collapsed into a bundle of dead rags.

"You got one!" McLean yelled triumphantly.

"Did—did I? I'm sorry—I mean—" Her voice trailed choked with fear.

He looked quickly at her. The girl's eyes were filled with tears. "I didn't really mean to do it," she blubbered.

"Cut out that damned caterwauling!" he ordered. "This is war. The fact that just you and me, and some wild Martian Indians, are involved in this war doesn't make it any less deadly. If we don't get them, they'll get us." He held up his bandaged hand. "Do you think the tribesman who did that was after my fingers? He wasn't!

What he wanted was my head!"

"All right, all right, I understand this intellectually, it's just that my emotions got involved."

"Get them uninvolved," he said. "How could you see that Martian when I couldn't?"

"Better ability to differentiate colors, probably," the girl answered. "Women can usually see colors better than men. That was the way I picked him out."

"Do some more differentiating between colors," he invited, waving her back to the sight of the Rangeley. "Maybe, by Harry, we'll get out of here alive after all!" Hope surged in his voice. "If we do—"

"If we do, then what?" the girl asked.

He shook his head. "If we do get out, I couldn't tell you anyhow. There's no point in talking. But in case we don't get out, I want you to know that you're a mighty nice kid."

"Well—thanks." Her eyes were deep blue again, like the skies of Earth. She moved toward him.

"Hey, what did you do that for?"

"Just an impulse. I always kiss men who tell me I'm a nice kid."

"Nice kid, nice kid, nice kid," McLean said.

"You're too eager." The blush on her cheeks was visible through the sand. Hastily she applied her eye to the sight of the Rangeley. McLean sighed. He had never had a girl. It seemed to him that fate was playing him a cruel joke to try to give him one under these conditions, in a hole in the sand with wild Martian tribesmen surrounding him. He mentally estimated the distance to the desert buggy, considered their chances of making this trip and arriving alive. He was shaking his head at his own estimate when the Rangeley burped again.

"I missed!" the girl said. "Oh! Here he comes!"

McLean shoved her away from the sight. The Martian was moving toward them, fast. Instead of a gun, he had a spear.

"You didn't miss," the roustabout said. "You hit him but you only wounded him. This is his death charge!"

He pressed the trigger of the Rangeley. The gun burped twice. In the distance the exploding slugs threw up small geysers in the sand. The native kept coming. In the sight, he looked to be ten feet tall.

Vaulting the Rangeley, he seemed to grow even more in stature. He screamed at the top of his lungs as he thrust downward with the spear.

McLean shoved the girl away from him, rolled in the other direction. He caught a glimpse of a metal spear point burying itself in the sand in the exact spot where he had been lying. The roustabout wrapped both arms around the legs of the Martian and yanked hard. The fellow came down, on top of McLean. The human shoved him aside.

The Martian was a twisting, squirming, raging, biting, clawing, kicking wild tangle of knobby knees and knobbier elbows. Whichever of these knobby joints hit, it hurt. The fellow had a knife in his belt, which he was struggling to get free. McLean, seeing the knife, was trying equally hard to keep him from getting it.

The human caught the hilt of the knife with his left hand. With his right fist, he struck at the native's stomach. Grunting, the Martian opened his mouth and tried to bite McLean. The roustabout, no stranger to this kind of fighting, butted him in the open mouth with the top of his head, then struck again, savagely, at the stom-

ach. He felt his fist sink home in the leathery tissue there.

The native grunted and went limp. McLean jerked the knife from its scabbard. He did not have to use it. A series of fine tremors passing through his body, the Martian was dying. The explosive slug from the Rangeley had finally done its work. With relief McLean let the body drop.

McLean wiped sweat and sand from his face. "That was the death charge, all right. But you didn't miss. See—" He pointed to the wound in the Martian's chest.

The Rangeley stopped burping as the girl took her eyes from the sight and looked around. Glancing at the Martian, she hastily averted her face. An instant later, she was back at the sight. The Rangeley began burping again.

McLean had the impression that all the time he had been fighting with the Martian, the Rangeley had been burping.

She had kept the gun going!

There was something he wanted to say to this archaeologist. He waited until he had enough breath to say it.

"You're all right," he said at last. "I mean you use your head and keep the others

holed up while I fight this one."

She flashed a smile at him. "They're not holed up, they're running," she answered.

McLean lifted his head above the level of the hole. A corpse was sprawled almost at the muzzle of the Rangeley. A second lay fifty feet away. A third was perhaps a hundred yards distant.

While he had been fighting the berserk Martian, the others had seized the opportunity to charge.

"Good girl! You saved our necks." He watched the running tribesmen. She was keeping the sand at their heels thoroughly stirred up with slugs from the Rangeley.

"Wonderful!" McLean breathed. "Lift your sights just a little—"

The Rangeley went into silence. Looking down, he saw that her shoulders were shaking with sobs.

"I know how you feel," he said, gently. "But you had to do it, to save our necks. Come on! Let's get back to our car while they're still running and we have the chance!" He swung into action.

Collapsing the sight into place, he swung the Rangeley and its tripod mounting over his shoulder. Catching the

girl by one hand, he began to run.

To both, the car looked like heaven. It was that, and more. Here in this desert each had found in the other something that he had searched for all his life and had not found. There was heaven in this thought. McLean could hear the girl panting as she ran beside him, but she was also laughing. He began to laugh too, from pure happiness. He squeezed her hand and she squeezed back.

His laughter went into quick silence as he saw the tube of the needle ray gun projecting past the rear tire of the desert car. The bright, baleful eye of a Martian crouching there was visible behind the weapon.

"It's a trap!" he gasped. "They ran on purpose, knowing we would beat it to our car as soon as they were gone."

Skidding to a halt, he tried to bring the Rangeley off his shoulder. The needle ray gun winked at him. He coughed and went down in the sand.

The gun winked again, spitting its bright eye of light at the girl. She went down like a falling doll.

McLean pulled himself up on one knee and one hand. There was a hole in his chest

as big as his fist, but there was no pain. The high energy radiation from the needle gun seared the nerve endings so that no sensations were transmitted.

The roustabout shook his fist at the native crouched under the car.

"You got us this time," he yelled. "But we'll be back again. You can't lick us. We'll get you if it takes another million years." The drive that had brought *homo sapiens* up from the mud flats was in his voice.

His head began to swim. He took another deep breath. Beside him, the girl lay completely silent. Only her eyes showed that she knew what had happened.

McLean looked at her. There was still something

that he wanted to say. His mind was fogging and he had difficulty in finding the words.

"The next time through, I want to meet you earlier," he said at last. "I want us to have the chance we missed this trip, of a home and a bunch of—" He coughed. "And a bunch of kids," he ended.

The girl said nothing. She was beyond the ability to speak. But she understood him. The glow that came into her eyes made them as beautiful, and as full of promise, as the skies of Earth.

McLean quietly laid down.

The returning tribesmen danced their wild victory dance around the two humans. Level and bare, the endless sands of Mars stretched far away.

THE END



"You'll never get me up on those things!"

DEADLY DECOY

By CLYDE MITCHELL

"THANK you for permitting me to come to your office," said the Damakoi, very politely.

"Sit down," I said, and glanced at the instruments on my hidden desk panel. With a member of the most fanatically dangerous race in the Galaxy sitting across from me, I didn't feel like taking chances.

Every non-radiating detector we had was focussed on the blue-skinned being before me, and every meter showed that the alien was harmless. Which didn't necessarily mean anything, of course—Holdreth Khain of Damak could easily have had something else up his sleeve. It was my job to make sure that whatever it might be, it wouldn't work.

Would you say present-day Secret Service men have a tough job protecting the President? No doubt, but as time goes on it will get tougher. Here is about as tricky a method of liquidation as we've ever come across.

"I realize that you don't trust me," the Damakoi said. "But I have come here merely to warn you. If you have time to listen to my story—"

He left the sentence hanging, as though waiting for a rebuke from me. But I'd had my orders.

"It's not that, Holdreth Khain," I said, keeping my voice smooth; "We realize that a high percentage of your race are loyal to the Galactic Federation. You are all fanatical in your beliefs, of course, but that is merely a racial psychological trait. There are as many of the Damakoi for us as against us. The trouble is, we can never know which is which."

It wasn't quite true. There were many more of the Damakoi against us than for us.



Deadly enemies, they drank to each other's damnation.

At least seventy percent of the beings from the planet Damak hated the principles that the Galactic Federation stood for. If this alien was against us, I was in one devil of a jam.

"My people have acquired a very unsavory reputation throughout the Galaxy," the Damakoi said. "But I am not the assassin type, myself." He waved a four-fingered blue hand in a deprecative gesture. "I am in complete disagreement with the anti-Federation beliefs which are widely held on my planet."

I nodded and tried to keep my face pleasant. I had little enough love for the Damakoi—they were mostly hotheads whose suicide assassins had done too much already to wreck Galactic amity. I trusted Holdreth Khain about as far as I could throw a chimney by the smoke.

"And why did you wish to see me, Holdreth Khain?" I asked.

He seemed terribly tired and sad, as if the many sins of his countrymen all weighed heavily on his shoulders. He put a hand up to his face and brushed across it, as if to brush away his own fears and worries.

"I'll come straight to the

point, Mr. Cameron. One of my fellow Damakoi—a man named Zorvash Pedrik—is on this planet. He landed in an undetectable one-man spaceship, carrying a theta bomb."

I nodded, and I could feel my jaw muscles tightening. If a Damakoi assassin could get inside the Galactic Capitol building carrying a theta bomb, the whole Council would die of radiation. A theta bomb doesn't explode; it flares. The resulting hellish radiation kills everything within half a mile of the radiation center. It consists of two little spheres of ditherium—one positive, the other negative. When they get within a few inches of each other—*poof!*

"How is he carrying it?" I asked. "A theta bomb has to be heavily shielded; even when they're several feet apart, the radiation is enough to kill whoever's carrying it unless they're pretty heavily shielded."

The Damakoi spread his hands in a shrug. "I do not know; all I can tell you is that I know the assassin personally. I can recognize him."

It sounded good, but I still didn't trust the being. His kind were too treacherous and fanatic. Even the ones on the side of the Galactic govern-

ment were a hotheaded bunch.

Holdreth Khain said bitterly: "It will be the ghastliest outrage ever committed by a Damakoi—and that covers a lot of territory. The explosion flare will wipe out the delegates from hundreds of worlds."

"I take it you don't approve?"

Khain looked up. "My people—many of them—oppose the Multiworld Charter and the Galactic government. They will take any steps necessary to destroy the government. And in doing so, they have left a trail of blood throughout space.

"I have long disagreed—sometimes violently—with this bloody policy of assassination. I have personally removed fourteen of the attempted killers."

I tried to keep a grim smile off my face. This bird was a true Damakoi; he hated the killer policy, but saw nothing strange in the fact that he had wiped out fourteen of them himself. If he had.

"Luckily," he continued, "I happened to find out what Zorvash Pedrik intended to do. I could not kill him personally, but I have been able to get here in time to head him off. I want you to find him—before he succeeds."

I nodded slowly. "I understand, Holdreth Khain. It is a noble and honorable thing that you are doing. I'll see to it that you get a proper reward for this information."

"No reward will be necessary," the Damakoi said. "The failure and death of Zorvash Pedrik will be reward enough for me."

"All right," I said, "let's see what we can figure out."

I was sitting right on top of a powder keg, and I knew it—but what could I do but see it through?

The Galactic Capitol is a great, airy pile of a building that soars a full three hundred stories into the air. It rears up from the heart of Central City, jutting into the sky like the man-made mountain that it is. Around it, the hundreds of floodlights cast a shower of brilliant radiance over its sparkling, milk-white walls.

I had stationed armed guards at each of the ten entrances, the fastest and most quick-witted men in the Service. It would be almost impossible for a Damakoi to get inside undetected.

But "almost" isn't good enough. My nerves were tighter than violin strings, and they felt as though they

were vibrating at high pitch.

I was in a hell of a touchy position. If *all* the Damakoi had been against us, it would have been easy—just blast every one that got within half a light year of the Capitol. Unfortunately, about three out of ten Damakoi were allies, and their insidious inside work on their own planet kept the dangerous fanatics badly crippled. We couldn't afford to kill three innocent Damakoi for every seven guilty.

I was pretty sure I knew where Holdreth Khain stood, but I couldn't take any chances.

I knew he wasn't carrying a theta bomb on him; the detectors would have picked up the radiation from the two spheres. Even if he'd had it concealed inside his body, there would be no way of putting enough lead around it to conceal it. I wished there was some way I could X-ray him, but X-rays are deadly to the Damakoi. Unlike human beings, the Damakoi can't even stand a little bit of hard radiation; they die if they're even X-rayed.

The two of us approached the immense bulk of the Grand Capitol. I was saying, "Damakoi have been upsetting the social equilibrium for

over a century. It almost seems as though your people get some sort of unholy joy out of wrecking everything that other beings build, work, and strive for." It was a thinly-veiled insult, and it was meant that way; I wanted to get his reaction.

He looked at me oddly for a moment, but he said nothing.

"Come along," I said. "Let's go around and meet the guards. I want to make sure they know you. I wouldn't want to have you killed unnecessarily."

I took Holdreth Khain from gate to gate, exhibiting him to my men. At each entrance, I saw the men's eyes fill with suspicion while their manners remained polite.

"All right," I said, after we had been to all ten gates, "now the guards will recognize you. Let's start looking for Zorvash Pedrik—before he causes trouble."

Holdreth Khain nodded grimly. "Let's go."

Somewhere in the city was a killer with a theta bomb—if Holdreth Khain wasn't lying. And I had a hunch he was telling the truth about Zorvash Pedrik.

There were eight Damakoi legitimately in the city. All of

them were known to be pro-Galactic men with the possible exception of a Damakoi by the name of Jedon Onomondo, who was still suspected of having anti-Government sentiments in spite of the fact that he had helped us in one or two minor matters.

But Jedon Onomondo had been in the city for three months or so; we'd had him tailed all that time. He couldn't have come to Earth in the last week in an undetectable spaceship.

Nevertheless, I ordered a double watch kept on him.

The next stop was to comb the city for radiation sources.

Ditherium is funny stuff. There are two kinds: positive and negative. When one kind gets near the other, the radiation given out increases as the distance between them decreases. At ten feet from each other, they give out easily detectable X-rays. Within a few inches, they flare violently in the hard gamma.

I knew that no Damakoi could carry them around unless they were encased in heavy lead; the radiation would kill him.

Even so, I started looking for radiation in the city. I had an odd hunch I'd find something.

It took several hours to go

over the whole city. The normal sources, such as the power pile on Four Hundredth Street East, were quickly spotted and ruled out. But eventually we located a center of neutrino radiation in the Hotel Grenada, up on Skyline Drive.

"He's in the Hotel Grenada," I told Holdreth Khain. "Let's surprise him before he has a chance to set off that bomb."

The Hotel Grenada was a huge, ancient structure that had been built just after the atomic bombs had blasted the city during the Final War, and it showed every century of its age. It had once been an imposing structure, but its chromium trim had begun to peel, and the aluminum siding was whitely pitted with oxide.

I walked into the lobby and flashed my identity bracelet at the bored-looking clerk. "Do you have any Damakoi registered here?"

The clerk looked a little bewildered. "Gosh, mister, I wouldn't know a Damakoi if I saw one. We got lots of aliens registered, though."

"I am a Damakoi," said Holdreth Khain. There was a touch of pride in his voice, and I felt my nerves tighten a little more.

The clerk looked at him. "Oh, yeah! Sure. Guy checked in yesterday."

"Let's see the registration," I said.

The clerk pulled out the book and flipped it open. There was the name, big, bold, and firm.

Zorvash Pedrik. Room 706A.

I left one of my men at the desk to make sure that no one warned Room 706A, and headed for the lift tube. Holdreth Khain and I went up to the seventieth floor and looked for 6A.

I took out the key which the clerk had given me and carefully slid it into the lock, trying not to make a sound. I really didn't think anything would happen here. The Damakoi wouldn't set off the bomb this far away from the Grand Capitol; fanatics don't waste their lives on nobodies like me—not when they're out after much bigger game.

The key engaged, and as the door slid open, I stepped inside, my blaster held at the ready.

The room was empty.

The bed was made, the ashtrays were clean, the windows were closed. Zorvash Pedrik might have registered for the room, but he hadn't spent much time in it.

He was on the loose—somewhere in the city—carrying around something which could kill everyone in the Grand Capitol if it were set off.

"No sign of him," said Holdreth Khain.

"Doesn't look that way." Then I spotted something. "Hold it—what's that?"

I crossed the room to the writing desk that stood against the far wall. There was a small box on it and it was weighting down a piece of paper.

I pulled out the piece of paper. It was a note—addressed to me.

Dear Cameron, it said, in the clear script of a voice-writer, There's no point in your looking for me here, because I'm not going to wait here for you to catch me. Be sure that I'll be able to complete my mission here despite the efforts of your department and the treachery of my misguided countryman.

Zorvash Pedrik

"We'll have to pick up the trail somewhere else," I said. "We better get moving."

When we reached the lobby, I phoned Ned Dearborn, my second in command. His blocky features filled the screen and his three-dimen-

sional representation looked inquisitively at me.

I said: "Ned, get up here to the Grenada and pick up a neutrino generator in Room 706A. It was sitting on a note to me. It's harmless, but it's what the boys picked up on the detectors."

Ned smiled grimly. "Just a dummy, eh? Okay; I'll send up a squad right away. Anything else?"

"Better alert the local police," I told him. "Pick up any Damakoi that isn't known to us. In case you pick him up, get him as far away from the city as you can. Take him out and dunk him in the lake if you have to. Get a plane ready and set up a robopilot."

"Watch him closely. If he's carrying anything at all, shoot first and ask questions later. Got that?"

"Got it, Chief." His face faded from the screen.

Holdreth Khain looked agitated. "You say that the box on the table was radioactive? I might have been exposed!"

I shook my head. "Neutrino radiation isn't dangerous, not even to a Damakoi. Don't worry about it."

"But how do you know it was a neutrino generator?"

"I know what those things look like," I told him. "They are expensive as hell, and no

one would go to the expense of making one just to load it with ordinary radioactives."

"I hope you're right," said the Damakoi.

I drove Holdreth Khain back to the Capitol. "Look," I told him, "there are going to be plenty of trigger-happy policemen roaming around this town for a while. I want to get you to someplace where you'll be safe, but I've got to keep you near me. If we catch Zorvash Pedrik, I want you to identify him."

"Yes, I see," he said. "And, if you'll pardon me for thinking of my own miserable life, I am afraid that Zorvash Pedrik intends to kill me for betraying him." He thought for a minute. "I would be safe inside the Capitol," he said at last.

I suppose the expression on my face must have shown him what I thought of the idea of allowing any Damakoi inside the Grand Capitol, because he said, hurriedly: "Surely you must know that I am not carrying a theta bomb or any other kind of atomic bomb. Your radiation detectors would have spotted it, would they not?"

I had to admit that they would have spotted it if he were carrying anything that would fission.

"Very well, then. You will have me under guard, will you not? Your men can watch me. They wouldn't let me get away with anything odd."

It sounded logical, and I admitted it. "Okay," I said, "we'll put you in the basement of the Grand Capitol. You'll be safe there, and if we catch the killer, you'll be right there to identify him."

We pulled up in front of the Grand Capitol, and the Damakoi and I climbed out of the car. I'll admit that I still wasn't absolutely sure of my guess about Holdreth Khain, but since I knew he wouldn't be dangerous by himself, I felt I could take the chance.

The guards had the car surrounded by the time we got out. They took a good look at the Damakoi, and went over him again with detectors and searched him physically.

"You'll have to change your clothes completely," I told him. "We had one assassin who was wearing a special plastic suit that evaporated into a poisonous gas. It was rather nasty."

"Certainly," agreed Holdreth Khain. The guards led him away to the dressing room.

I went inside and got on

the phone to the Special Supplies Warehouse. The supply officer faded into the screen.

"What is it, Mr. Cameron?"

"Do you happen to have a twelve by twelve foot piece of invisible plexisteel?" I asked.

"We can cut you one in a hurry," he said.

"Cut me *two*," I ordered, "and get them over here to the Grand Capitol building fast—and I really mean *fast*."

"We'll have them there in seven—no, *six* minutes."

"Right. And send along construction men with them. I'm building a trap for a killer who thinks he's clever." I didn't add *I hope*, but I thought it.

I was sure that there would be no slip-ups. I'd been picked for my ability to outguess and outthink anyone and everyone who might try to hurt the Galactic Government, and so far, I'd succeeded; the Government itself had withstood everything sent against it.

Still, there had been slip-ups before. The security network protecting President Deller had failed badly when a Damakoi assassin smuggled himself into the Golden Palace. A meeting of the Solar Subcouncil had been bombed two years before despite the most painstaking precautions. There was no way of being

absolutely sure—I could only do my best. After all, the Damakoi weren't stupid—fanatic maniacs, yes, but not stupid.

I carefully checked the loading of my blaster, just in case I'd need it. Then I called Ned in and gave him his orders. Ned repeated them and then said: "I hope you're right, Chief."

"So do I," I agreed. "But it's the only way to handle the Damakoi."

"That planet's a plague spot," Ned said bitterly. "We ought to send the Galactic Fleet in there with a half-dozen good-sized planet wrecking bombs, and get rid of every damned one of them once and for all."

"You're being hasty, Ned," I said. "That would be genocide, the one thing that every race fears more than anything else. The Galactic Government would fall within a week after such an order was given."

"I know it; it was just wishful thinking."

"We'll get it under interplanetary control," I told him. "That's the sort of thing the Grand Council is working on right now. Once the proper laws are passed, we'll have Damak under our thumb and force them to be law-abiding

citizens. That's why they're so anxious to blow up the Capitol before anything definite is done."

"Yeah. Well, what do you want me to do after I've set up the plexisteel?"

"Nothing," I said. "We just wait. That's all we can do. Just wait."

We waited. Every cop in town was patrolling the streets, watching for a strange Damakoi. They had full, three-D photographs of the eight Damakoi known to be in the city; anyone who didn't match one of those photos would be picked up—or shot.

Before he could do anything, the assassin would have to get inside the Grand Capitol Building, and I was fairly sure he couldn't do that without my knowing it. But if I was wrong, the Galactic Government would be ruined.

I sat in my office for hours, smoking one cigarette after another and fortifying myself with coffee. The tension on my nerves was building up hour by hour until I could hardly sit down. I wanted to slug someone, to break open a Damakoi face with a fist and strangle the life out of his killer soul.

The phone chimed and I

jumped a foot before I realized what it was. I forced myself to be calm and reached over to turn on the screen.

The sharp-nosed, blue-skinned face of a Damakoi resolved itself on the screen. I recognized him immediately. It was Jedon Onomondo. He wasn't known to be absolutely trustworthy, but he had been useful to us in the past by giving us information we couldn't get otherwise.

"Hello, Jedon Onomondo," I said. "What is it?"

"Hello, Mr. Cameron." His voice was excited. "Listen, I want to talk to you."

"Go ahead," I said.

"No, not over the phone. There might be a tap. Listen, my life is in danger. You've got to come over to my place right away. You know where it is. I want to tell you something I found out—it's hot."

And he hung up without another word. Headed for his place.

Fifteen minutes later, I was going up the lift tube of a middle-class apartment house, heading toward the ninth floor. I had a sneaking hunch that I already knew what Jedon Onomondo would have to say, but I wanted to be positive. I rapped on the door of his apartment. The

door opened a crack; an eye peered out.

"Come in, Mr. Cameron," Jedon Onomondo said, swinging the door wide.

I didn't step in immediately; I took a quick look around the room, keeping my hand on my blaster butt. There was no one else in sight except the Damakoi.

I went on in and prowled around the room to satisfy myself that there was no one else present. Then I searched the rest of the apartment. The place was empty.

Jedon Onomondo was sitting in the middle of his living room, nervously smoking a Terran cigarette. The Damakoi are one of the few extraterrestrials who have taken up the use of tobacco. They looked ludicrous.

I didn't sit down. "All right; what's so all-fired important that it can't be told over the phone?"

The Damakoi blew out a long plume of smoke. "I understand you're looking for one of my countrymen who intends to set off a bomb inside the Grand Capitol Building," he said.

"How do you know?"

He looked pained. "Look, Mr. Cameron, just how dumb do you think I am? I have bits of inside information. I

pick things up here and there. I put them together."

"All right," I said. "What about it?"

"You're looking all over the city for a guy by the name of Zorvash Pedrik. He's supposed to have a bomb on him—a theta bomb. Right?"

I nodded. "So?"

"Well, you're wrong on two counts."

"Wrong? How are we wrong?" I watched him carefully.

"Well, you're wrong in the first place in scouring the town for Zorvash Pedrik because you've got him locked up right now. He's masquerading under the name of Holdreth Khain!"

I felt my nerves tighten again. They couldn't stand much more of this.

"That's ridiculous," I said. "Holdreth Khain isn't carrying any theta bomb. We've checked him very carefully."

"I know," said Jedon Onomondo. "That's where you're wrong in the second place. *Zorvash Pedrik isn't and never has been carrying a bomb.*"

I was careful with my expression. "You mean he's going to use some other method to blow up the Grand Capitol? Or is there some other trick he's going to try?"

The Damakoi shook his

head. "That isn't it. What I mean is that Zorvash Pedrik is a lunatic—he's absolutely insane!"

"Tell me more."

"Zorvash Pedrik is a madman," the Damakoi repeated. "He's been in neuropsychiatric hospitals more than once. He likes to think of himself as a great savior of the people—any people. On Damak, he has denounced more than one person falsely. He has denounced anti-Government and pro-Government men alike."

"He doesn't have any reason for it; he just likes to hog glory—any kind of glory."

"Wait a minute," I said. "This doesn't follow the pattern. I don't think that our Holdreth Khain is Zorvash Pedrik."

Jedon Onomondo looked blank. "Why not?"

"It doesn't fit," I said. "If what you say about Zorvash Pedrik is right, he would come to us under his own name and denounce someone else as a bomb carrier. That's the psychological pattern of these paranoids."

Jedon Onomondo just looked at me, frowning.

"I have a hunch that Holdreth Khain is telling the truth; Zorvash Pedrik is a

looney, all right, but now he's going to be a big hero in the proper way. If he sets off a theta bomb in the Grand Capitol Building, two-thirds of the people of Damak will hail him as a hero. They'll forget about the silly things he's done before. Doesn't that follow the paranoid pattern better?"

The Damakoi nodded slowly. "You may be right. The trouble is that it doesn't jibe with the information I've received from pretty reliable sources."

"Have you ever seen Holdreth Khain?" I asked.

"No," Jedon Onomondo admitted, "but I've seen Zorvash Pedrik."

"What does that prove?"

Jedon Onomondo leaned forward earnestly. "Listen, Mr. Cameron; I'll admit that we Damakoi are—well, as you Earthmen say, fanatic. We know what we believe in, and we fight for it. If that's stupid, well, it's stupid. But that's the way we are."

He stopped and took a deep breath.

"I believe in the cause of the Galactic Government. I know that very few of my people do, but I do.

"Now, I don't think we have the right to take a chance. Either the man you're

holding now is an anti-Government man or he isn't. If he isn't, I'll be glad to apologize or fight him to the death, whichever you or he prefer.

"But, I repeat, we can't take any chance. We've got to know.

"So, let me take a look at him. If he is Zorvash Pedrik, you can hold him and find out the truth. If he isn't, we can check on his story and find out where Zorvash Pedrik is."

I rubbed my chin, as though I were thinking my decision over, although I had already made up my mind. After a minute, I looked up at him and said: "In other words, you won't know whether this man is Zorvash Pedrik or not unless you see him?"

The Damakoi spread his hands. "How could I?"

I stood up. "Okay, Jedon Onomondo. Let's go. I'll get him out of the Grand Capitol, and we'll take a look at him."

"Fair enough," said the Damakoi. "Let's go."

By the time we got back to the Grand Capitol, things had happened. My assistant, Ned, was waiting for me by the main gate. When my car pulled up, he leaped aboard.

"Chief, something's happened. Nothing really serious,

except that that Damakoi that you left here has been hit by a high-frequency guard beam."

"How did that happen?"

Ned shrugged. "One of the guards let him walk around. Somehow, he managed to get hit by a beam. We can't figure out how; none of the ways to the guard beams are open. A freakish occurrence."

"Holdreth Khain doesn't know what happened. Evidently, he dragged himself from where he was hit. We have him in the Special Room now."

I got out of the car.

"All's well so far," I told him. "We don't need to worry about the slight burns from a guard beam. They're hard ultra-violet. They won't even touch an Earthman, except after long exposure, and they won't disable a Damakoi very long."

"This is worse than that," Ned said. "His leg is pretty badly blistered, and he's unconscious. The doctor says they're definitely guard beam burns, all right, so we don't have to worry about hard radiation." He spread his hands. "The thing is, the doctor says we can't move him."

I think I must have stood there for a full thirty seconds, saying nothing. The last little

piece of the puzzle had fallen into place.

Jedon Onomondo looked puzzled. "What is a guard beam?"

"It's a high-frequency ultra-violet ray," I told him. "It's projected across a hall or door. If anyone crosses it, an alarm rings. But in the section where we are keeping Holdreth Khain, they were all supposed to be shut off because you Damakoi are so sensitive to radiation." I turned to Ned again. "It looks as though there's not much else we can do except take Jedon Onomondo into the Grand Capitol to identify Holdreth Khain. We've got to see whether he's our killer or not."

"All right," Ned agreed. He turned to the Damakoi. "You'll have to come with me. We can't allow you down there without a complete examination."

The Damakoi went along complacently, while I went down below, into the lower level of the Capitol to see what had happened to Holdreth Khain.

He was lying on a couch in one of the big reception rooms, his eyes closed, and breathing heavily. His leg was bandaged, but I knew that

underneath it, the skin was a mass of blisters that looked like a bad case of sunburn.

There was a doctor standing nearby, but he looked rather helpless.

"What's the matter, Doctor?" I asked.

He frowned. "The trouble is that I don't know very much about the alien body chemistry of the Damakoi. I'm as helpless as anyone else. He's in pretty bad shape—I think."

I leaned over the supine Damakoi.

"Holdreth Khain, can you hear me?"

His eyes opened, and he blinked a couple of times. Then he looked directly at me. "I can hear you. But my—my leg hurts." He smiled feebly. "Damn you Terrans and your hellish alarm systems."

He tried to make it sound like a joke, but there was more than a trace of bitterness in his voice.

"Holdreth Khain," I said, "I'm bringing in a man to see you—one of your fellow Damakoi. We've got a sneaking hunch that he may be Zorvash Pedrik. Do you think you're up to identifying him?"

He seemed to grow a little stronger almost immediately.

"Certainly," he said. "Bring him in."

"Will you be all right, do you think?" I asked. "The doctor has to attend to another patient."

It was an out-and-out lie, but I wanted to get the doctor out of the room. The physician started to say something in protest, but I silenced him with a glance.

"I'll be all right," said Holdreth Khain.

The doctor took the hint and got out.

I pointed at a door across the room. "I'm going to bring the man in through that door. I want you to take a good look at him—the way he walks, the way he acts—notice everything about him. I want to be absolutely sure of our identification."

"Very well," said the Damakoi. "I'll watch him carefully. If it's Zorvash Pedrik, I'll know him."

"Good. I'll get him now." I went for the alien.

Jedon Onomondo had been searched thoroughly, and his clothing had been completely changed. He was wiping the dampness of perspiration from his blue, four-fingered hands with a handkerchief when I walked in.

"How is he, Mr. Cameron?" he asked.

"He'll be all right for a

while," I told him. "Are you ready to take a look at him?"

"Any time."

"Come along, then."

I led him down the corridor to a drop tube, and we went down to the door of the room where Holdreth Khain lay on a couch with two guards watching him. They had their instructions.

"He's in there," I told the Damakoi. I gestured at the door. "Now, don't get violent when you see him—if he's the man we want. I know you Damakoi are likely to lose your temper at the sight of an enemy, but we've got guards in there to stop you."

Jedon Onomondo's blue skin seemed to pale a little, but he said nothing. He nodded in agreement.

I opened the door. The Damakoi went in first, and I followed him, staying well behind.

Within a few seconds, I'd know whether my reasoning had been right.

Jedon Onomondo walked across the room. It was a long room, nearly forty feet from end to end. I stayed well behind, letting the Damakoi do as he pleased.

When he was about halfway across the room, he started to run.

Holdreth Khain had been

watching the approach of the other Damakoi, and, at the same instant he started to run, Holdreth Khain leaped out of the couch and ran toward Jedon Onomondo.

When they were still ten feet apart, they slammed solidly into the pair of invisible plexisteel walls I had had set up across the room.

They both screamed in hatred, and tried to batter down the walls. Then they realized what they had done to themselves and stopped.

I wasn't quite prepared for the Damakoi on my side of the wall. Jedon Onomondo turned, mouthing an oath in Damakese, and jumped at me.

I didn't avoid it in time, and we went down, rolling over and over on the floor. His arm went around my throat, squeezing off my air.

I managed to get a finger on the Damakoi's hand. I grabbed and twisted, and the arm came from around my throat.

He turned a little, and landed a solid left to my temple which filled the room with bursting stars. I shook my head to clear it and fended off another blow with my arm.

His guard was down, and I saw my chance. My left

drove into the pit of his stomach, and he doubled up, all the breath knocked out of him.

Then my right fist came up from somewhere around my knees and slammed into his jaw. The hard uppercut lifted him off his feet and slammed him back against the invisible wall.

He slumped to the floor, unconscious.

Good old one-two, I thought as I rubbed my knuckles.

The guards on the other side of the wall had finally managed to hold down Holdreth Khain. Ned Dearborn burst through the door behind me.

"You okay, Chief?"

"I'm all right," I told him, "but I think we have a couple of dying Damakoi on our hands."

Ned walked over and looked at the Damakoi I had just slugged. "How did they figure they'd get away with it?" he asked.

"Actually, it was a pretty good scheme," I told him. "They knew they couldn't get one man in here with a theta bomb; they'd never get past the guards and the detectors."

"So they planted a couple of spheres of ditherium in two men—a negative sphere

in one and a positive sphere in the other. All they had to do was stand close to each other, and the bomb would go off."

"What was it that tipped you off?" Ned asked.

"Several things. That phony note at the Hotel Granada, for instance. It was a plant to prove to me that there really was such a person as 'Zorvash Pedrik'—which there isn't, of course."

"In order to find the phony note, they had to give us a clue as to where it was. So they used a harmless neutrino generator, which would be spotted by our detectors."

"But a *real* assassin who actually knew that Holdreth Khain was working with us would have used something less harmless. Why an expensive neutrino generator, when some cheap radioactive would do? *Because he didn't want to kill Holdreth Khain!*"

"And that meant that our friendly Damakoi was a phony."

Ned shook his head. "What a screwy idea. Get two men in instead of one."

"Exactly," I said.

"But if they maneuvered it so that one of the Damakoi could get himself in my good graces and get himself into the building—our detectors

couldn't pick up just *one* sphere of ditherium, of course—and then put him in a position where the other half of the bomb would have to be brought to him as a logical part of the investigation—”

“Then that’s why Holdreth Khain burned himself!” Ned expostulated.

“Sure. He knew where those guard beams were. He burned himself so that we couldn’t move him. That

forced us to bring Jedon Onomondo to him.”

Ned put his hand on the invisible wall. “We had to let them go through with it, just to see what happened. When they hit these walls, they were exactly ten feet apart.”

I looked at the fallen Damakoi. “At that distance,” I said, “the two spheres put out just enough radiation to kill the Damakoi without hurting us. I’m afraid they don’t have much time left.” **THE END**

STATEMENT REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION OF AMAZING STORIES published monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 1, 1956.

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Managing editor, None.
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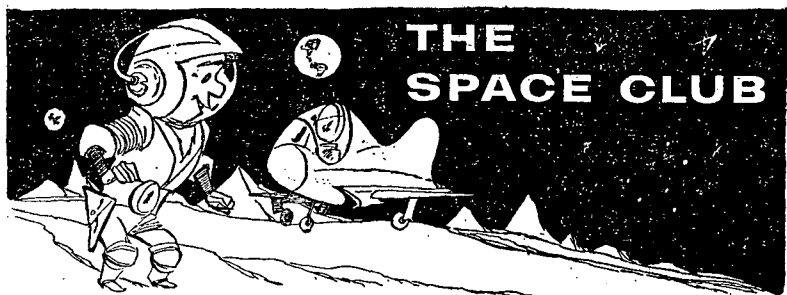
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State of New York, No. 24-3800350. Qualified in Kings County. Certificate filed in New York County. Commission expires March 30, 1957.



"The Space Club is a success. I've received 17 letters since the November issue came out and I'm expecting a lot more." This on a postcard from Frank Bergquist, one of our early members. We're pretty sure Frank has answered all of them and some warm friendships will result. Now how about you? Please don't feel the Club is for s-f fans only. Maybe you have other interests or hobbies a lot of people would be delighted to hear about. You may be depriving someone of a lot of pleasure by not joining the Club—and that someone may be you! So send in your name for listing and—presto—you're a member. Then any number of nice things may happen to you. We're waiting to hear from you gals in particular. Bashful? Don't be. Send in your name along with your hobbies, hopes, ambitions or anything else you want to talk about.

RICHARD BAKER, OUESNEL GENERAL DELIVERY, OUESNEL, BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA . . . Richard feels that Canadian s-f fans have not been representing themselves in either the fan section or the Space Club. He aims to remedy that with his letter and hopes that many others will follow suit. 25 years old, he has

been reading s-f for 11 years. He is studying rocketry and at present is taking courses in physics and higher mathematics.

RODNEY COOK, 817½ WEST MONTANA ST., LEWISTOWN, MONTANA . . . 15 years old and a sophomore in high school, Rodney is a comparatively new s-f fan. He

began to collect s-f books and magazines about a year ago. His collection is growing fast. He is willing to buy all material that he can get his hands on and maybe he'll trade or sell a few of his magazines. Hobbies include photography, hunting, bowling.

DICK R. CURRY, FALLSTON, MD. . . . 13 years old, Dick says he likes to sit down and read a good science-fiction book at least two times a month.

SHARI DIETZ, 1411 PEARL ST., SANTA MONICA, CALIF. . . . 19 years old, Shari is a stenographer with many other interests as movies, reading, roller derby. She has been a science-fiction fan for years and has often hoped for the opportunity to share her enthusiasm for this very interesting subject. Through the Space Club she will have this chance.

PALMER EILAND, 364 ARTHUR DRIVE, SHREVEPORT, LA. . . . 15 years old, Palmer has been reading s-f for about 5 years. He would like to start an s-f club in his area. Looking forward to two-part serials in *Amazing*.

JERRY ELLISON, ROUTE 3, GILMER, TEXAS . . . A senior at a country school, Jerry is 18 years old. An enthusiastic flyer, he is a corporal in the Civil Air Patrol. He has recently started a s-f collection which already has 75 books and magazines. An avid fan, he has some of his own theories about time travel, the universe, space travel and other facets in the field. He hopes to exchange these ideas with fellow fans. Further interests are astronomy, electronics and nature.

YVES GRANDJOUAN, 32 RUE LACEPEDE PARIS, FRANCE . . . 27 years old, Yves enjoys s-f very much. Unfortunately it is difficult and expensive to obtain American s-f magazines in France. He has read the limited number that he has been able to find and of course he has read all of those published in France. His favorite American authors are Sturgeon, Asimov, Oliver, Van Vogt. He hopes that many fans will show interest in French and perhaps he will be able to send them some samples.

RALPH H. HARDING, 38 CENTRAL AVENUE, MAYLANDS, WEST AUSTRALIA . . . 47 years old, 5'2", brown hair, brown eyes, 180 pounds. Ralph hopes to establish contact with s-f fans throughout the world. His hobbies are fretwork, fishing, writing letters, collecting science-fiction magazines and reading them. He began this pastime back in 1926.

CLIFF L. HOSFORD, BOX F 29, 22nd A. & E. MAINTON, MARCH AFB, CALIF. . . . 23 years old, Cliff has been teaching electronics—radar, in the Air Force. Hobbies and interests are many: s-f, chess, astronomy, space chess, spelunking, math., architecture, agriculture, swimming, mountain climbing, roller skating, and hunting with a camera.

PETER KANE, JR., 241 12th STREET, WEST BABYLON, N. Y. . . . Peter likes all s-f and will enjoy corresponding with others with similar taste. He especially likes stories of E.S.P., time travel and parallel worlds. His favorite writers are Heinlein, Asimov, Bradbury and Silverberg. 14 years old, his other interests include ping-pong,

stamp collecting, swimming, drawing, science and making scale-model airplanes.

MRS. JEANNE KISCH, 4873 COCHRAN ST., SANTA SUSANA, CALIF. . . . Housewife and s-f fan, Mrs. Kisch is 36 years old. She would like to correspond with s-f fans, especially those who have back issues of *Amazing* containing Edgar Rice Burroughs stories and are willing to sell them.

KENNETH KNECHT, 448 E. PEARL ST., LIMA, OHIO . . . 22 years old, Kenneth is a layout artist at Neon Products, Inc., and does part-time work as a cab driver. He is interested in tape recording, music—particularly jazz—plays the Spanish guitar and bass, ham radio and of course, science-fiction.

KEN LAWRENCE, 13241 W. CHICAGO, DETROIT 28, MICH. . . . 27 years old, brown hair, green eyes, a science-fiction fan for 6 years. The Space Club is just the thing Ken's been waiting for. He is a former radio and TV announcer and disc jockey. Other interests are in the line of dramatics.

PAUL MONROE, X-DIVISION, U.S.S. HELENA, CA 75, C/O FPO, SAN FRANCISCO, CALIF. . . . Paul is 22 years old, 5'6", has blond hair. He has been reading s-f for 10 years. Other interests are music, hiking. Would like to hear from as many fans as possible.

BENJ. C. MONTAGUE, JR., 5030, CANTON, DETROIT, MICHIGAN . . . A regular reader of *Amazing*, Benj. wants to hear from s-f fans over 18. Also fans interested in rockets and space.

NICK DE MORGAN, BOX 183, RIDGEFIELD, N. J. . . . Over the years through contact with s-f personalities and his own interest in the field, Nick has acquired a collection of s-f books, magazines, etc., numbering about 2,000. He has decided to start a trading center for s-f fans where they can swap whatever they have collected for things they want even more. If they don't have anything tradeable then they may be able to pick up what they want at very low prices. Write to Nick and ask him about his Swapper's Center. Include a list of what you want and if you have something to trade list that too.

JUDY MUSICK, 2240 WHEELER ST., CINCINNATI 19, OHIO . . . 18 years old, 5'6", brown eyes, dark brown hair, Judy is a do-it-yourself enthusiast. She is an intense reader of any kind of science-fiction. She hopes to hear from other fans about her own age.

EARLE PITTMAN, 3420th LOWRY AFB, DENVER, COLO. . . . Earle is 20 years old. He likes to pursue his hobbies by building crackpot inventions. He lists almost everything in the physical sciences as his hobbies: particularly chemistry, radio, physics. Especially likes to take some of the fantastic ideas put forth in science-fiction and find a bit of factual theory to cover them.

TOM PORTER, 414 WEST FREMONT ST., FOSTORIA, OHIO . . . 18 years old, Tom wants to write to s-f fans in Germany, England, Scotland and elsewhere.

Test Your Space I. Q.

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. The Earth is eclipsed by passing between the sun and moon? | T |
| 2. A person's weight on Jupiter would be greater than his weight on Earth? | F |
| 3. Buck Rogers made his first appearance in <i>Amazing Stories</i> in 1928? | T |
| 4. Earth is the fifth largest planet in our Solar System? | F |
| 5. Brennschluss is a German word for that instant when a rocket leaves the Earth's gravitational field? | T |
| 6. Hydrogen is the lightest known element? | F |
| 7. The smallest known planet is Mercury? | T |
| 8. Half life is a term used to describe viruses? | F |
| 9. The WAC Corporal was the first propeller-driven aircraft to reach the ionosphere? | T |
| 10. Pure alcohol could not be used as fuel in space ships of the future? | F |
| 11. Interstellar space is a complete vacuum? | T |
| 12. Transistors can often be used to do the work of vacuum tubes? | F |
| 13. Theodore Sturgeon is a pen name of Robert Silverberg? | T |
| 14. The red shift theory of the universe indicates an expanding universe? | F |
| 15. The fossil record of life on Earth goes back more than half a billion years? | T |
| 16. Most microwaves (radar, etc.), are line-of-sight waves? | F |
| 17. Cosmic rays penetrate the interior of modern steel frame buildings? | T |
| 18. The Earth's barometric pressure at sea level is approximately 16 pounds per square foot? | F |
| 19. Piltdown man is a caveman fossil discovered in the British Isles? | T |
| 20. Edgar Rice Burroughs was once a shipping clerk? | F |

ANSWERS

1. F An eclipse is when the moon passes between the Earth and the sun.
2. T A person's weight on Jupiter would be less than his weight on Earth because the mass of Jupiter is over three times that of Earth. Weight is determined by the pull of gravity which is a function of the mass of the planet.
3. T Buck Rogers made his first appearance in *Amazing Stories* in 1928.
4. T Earth is the fifth largest planet in our Solar System. It ranks behind Jupiter, Neptune, Uranus and Saturn in that order.
5. F Brennschluss is a term to describe the moment when all of a rocket's fuel is consumed.
6. T Hydrogen is the lightest known element with an atomic number of 1.
7. T The smallest known planet is Mercury with an equatorial diameter of approximately 3000 miles.
8. F Half life is a term used to describe degeneration of non-stable elements as radium.
9. F The WAC Corporal was not a propeller-driven aircraft, but a rocket.
10. T Pure alcohol could not be used as fuel in space ships of the future because it gets too hot.
11. F Although interstellar space does not have any atmosphere it is not completely empty.
12. T By application of small voltage transistors can regulate the flow of large currents of electricity.
13. F Theodore Sturgeon and Robert Silverberg are both authors in their own right.
14. T The red shift theory of the universe indicates an expanding universe. The theory is based on spectral analysis of light from intergalactic bodies.
15. T The fossil record of life on Earth goes back more than half a billion years and perhaps more.
16. T Microwaves are extremely short and limited to line-of-sight transmission.
17. T The wave length of cosmic rays is such that they are not absorbed by modern steel frame buildings.
18. F The Earth's barometric pressure at sea level is approximately 16 pounds per square inch.
19. F Piltdown man was a fraud.
20. T Edgar Rice Burroughs was once a shipping clerk.

QUEST OF THE GOLDEN APE

(Synopsis of First Installment)

On Tarth, twin planet to Earth, there were three major powers—Abaria, Nadia, and Ofrid. Led by Karnod, Abaria defeated Nadia through treachery. Karnod was slain and left the final destruction of Nadia to his sadistic son, Retoc, who slaughtered all but a handful of Nadians. He tortured to death the beautiful Evalla, Queen of Nadia, and leveled the nation until not a stone was left standing. Only the tower housing the Great Clock of Tarth defied Retoc's destructive efforts and there was born a legend that after one hundred years, the clock would strike to announce the coming of a great Nadian avenger. This legend had foundation because:

Upon the death of Evalla, Portox the Ofridian Wizard, escaped to Earth where, through his science, he hid the infant son of Evalla in a huge house near New York City, surrounding it with psychological barriers that protected the infant for one hundred years. As a result of Portox' scientific miracles, the infant then arose from suspended animation, during which he had grown into a young man of heroic proportions, the life span on Tarth being three hundred years.

Having no name, he names himself—Bram Forest—and through a device resembling a wrist watch—left him by Portox who died before completing his mission—Bram returns to Tarth. He materializes among a group of fugitive Nadians where Retoc has just slain Jlomec, brother Bontarc and Volna, rulers of powerful Nadia. Bram engages Retoc and is seriously wounded before Retoc flees.

The Nadians take flight too, all except Ylia, the beautiful brown virgin who takes him to a cave and saves his life. Bram, while completely educated, has no knowledge of his mission nor of Tarth. Ylia tells him of the planet and her words stimulate vague memories of his mother. He now recalls an amulet he found on Earth and lost before he could examine it. He resolves to get it. He is just in the process of leaving Tarth when Retoc comes to the cave bent upon killing Ylia to prevent her from telling the Nadians he killed Jlomec. Thus ended the first installment.

QUEST OF THE GOLDEN APE

By IVAR JORGENSEN
and ADAM CHASE

PART TWO

(Synopsis on page 71)

9

In Custody

BRAM FOREST regained consciousness upon a grassy slope across which slanted the rays of a setting sun. The same sun that had warmed him upon the planet Tarth—of this he was certain.

He arose and glanced about quickly, realizing—while he was sure he had returned to Earth—that he could be many miles from the mysterious mansion under which he had spent one hundred years.

At first his heart sank because the terrain was not at all familiar. Then it rose again as he saw the tower of the gray mansion pushing somberly above the line of the the forest top. He stood for a moment, orientating himself with the tower the center of his calculations. Then he





her own body in defense of her loved one.

moved out of the glade toward his right.

But he had gone scarcely ten feet into the wooded area when his sharpened instincts gave him quick warning and he dropped like a stone and lay still.

The sound of footsteps greatedened until their echo came loud in his ears and a man passed not ten feet from his outstretched hands.

The man wore the blue uniform and smart cap of a state trooper and he was on the alert but not so much so as to detect the silent Bram Forest.

The latter, with the first moment he had had to give thought to himself since he had awakened in the cavern on the Plains of Ofrid, realized suddenly that he was no longer naked. He had of course been vaguely aware of this before but now he gave it his attention and realized what had happened. He focused on past events.

During his time of unconsciousness from the treacherous Abarian's blade thrust, the beautiful Ylia had garbed him in the brilliant uniform of the slain Nadian, Jlomec. This uniform was both colorful and practical but it did nothing to either hide or en-

cumber the great muscles of his chest and arms, thighs.

The State Trooper passed on his way and Bram Forest wondered what he was doing about the old mansion. But this did not occupy his thoughts for long. As soon as the way was clear, he moved like a great cat through the underbrush toward the spot from whence he had made his exodus to the planet Tarth. As he skirted the last glade, he prayed that the second article in the box containing the fabulous disc he had now switched to his right wrist, still lay where he had carelessly dropped it.

He came to the edge of the open field and warily surveyed the terrain. No one was in sight. He strained his ears for the sound of any approaching footsteps and heard nothing. He sprang swiftly into the open and ran across the field.

It was there—the flat white package—exactly where he had dropped it that first morning. He swept it up, intent upon returning to the shelter of the forest.

But his interest in what lay beneath the white paper wrapping had grown to such a point of intensity that his footsteps lagged, his attention riveted upon the tanta-

lizing thing, and he came to a full stop mid-field while his strong fingers tore at the wrappings.

The white parchment came away and Bram Forest stared at what was revealed. Then a strange and terrifying change came over him. His handsome features contorted as every drop of blood was drained from his face. His great frame shook as with an illness and such a demoniacal rage came over him as few people in this or any other world have seen.

Now a great and terrifying cry arose from his throat; a cry that make even the beasts of this forest freeze in their tracks and crouch lower in their places of concealment. A cry of such rage and agony that even the trees of the forest seemed to pause and listen in mute wonder. . . .

Mulcahey Davis, State Trooper, picked brambles from the legs of his blue uniform and cursed his assignment in no uncertain terms.

Why in the name of law and decency had he and Mowbray been ordered to patrol this tangled, deserted spook-hole? Sure—the body of some old hobo had been found in a well with rocks thrown on it but what were he and Mow-

bray going to prove by tramping around through these brambles?

Mulcahey Davis heard footsteps and looked up to see Mowbray laboring across the last few yards of his beat. Mowbray broke from the last clutching strands of thorn bush and began beating burrs from his legs. "Find anything?" he asked.

"Not a blasted thing. It's downright crazy, our clamoring around this woods. What will we find? A couple of rabbits?

"That body in the well has to be investigated," Mowbray said, seriously. "Pretty odd deal."

"What progress have they made?"

"They've located the outfit that held this place in trust, but the guy in charge had a stroke or something. He can't be questioned. They may never be able to question him. An old guy named Pride. He's in pretty bad shape."

"Chances are he wouldn't know anything about it even if they could ask him. What would he have been doing out here?"

"There's that funny fire in the basement, too. Nothing routine about that. Fire so hot it melted rock. A lot of unanswered questions here."

"If they'd ask me, I'd tell them—"

Mulcahey Davis' throat froze as a terrible cry smote his ears. Mowbray paled suddenly and the two men looked at each other in instinctive fear.

But they were tried and tested law-enforcement officers and were not held in the grip of terror for long. "Did you hear that?" Mulcahey Davis said.

"Good lord, man! How could I help it!"

"Where'd it come from?"

"Over there."

"Let's go."

The two troopers plunged again into the undergrowth to emerge at the edge of an open field. And regardless of their personal courage and experience in their line of effort, what they saw froze them anew.

A giant of a man—a creature of godlike proportions stood in the open field, washed by the rays of the setting sun. His great arms were held aloft and he was looking up into the sky with a terrifying expression that was a mixture of pain and rage.

He was speaking and his great voice echoed in what was remindful of a thunderous prayer. "I know not the purpose for which I was

created but well do I now know my dedicated task. Vengeance! Vengeance such as this world or any other has never seen!"

With this the giant—clad in a strange colorful uniform of some sort—dropped to his knees and lowered his great head into his hands.

Mowbray's face was grim and alert. "Come on," he whispered. "We're behind him so we get a break. Move in quietly. And let's get him before he sees us. I've got a hunch he could lick ten of us and we don't want to use our guns."

They crossed the field softly and moved in behind the kneeling man. They acted in concert with an expertness telling of lengthy experience.

Mowbray was thankful for the way it turned out. He knew not why the giant put up no resistance. The man seemed stunned as from a great blow and before he could recover, the troopers had him bound hand and foot with their belts.

Mulcahey Davis got to his feet and wiped the sweat from his face. "There's one for the psychos and a padded cell afterwards."

"You said it," Mowbray agreed heartily. "Let's take him in."

The Road to Nadia

THE stads of Abaria, like the masters who rode them, were ill-accustomed to the clear cold air of Nadia. They snorted visible jets of vapor into the crisp air as their splayed feet scratched and slipped, seeking purchase on the ice-covered, up-tilted rocky plain.

"It's an accursed country, lord," Hultax told the king of the Abarians as their steeds advanced shoulder and shoulder.

Retoc sat tall and straight on the stad's broad back, his black cloak with the royal emblem billowing in the stiff wind, his hard handsome face ruddy with the cold air, his cruel eyes mere slits against the Nadian wind. "Quiet, you fool," he admonished Hultax. "Everything we Abarians say and do in Nadia must be sweetness and light—now."

The vanguard of the long column of Abarian riders had reached a rushing mountain stream, its waters too swift to freeze in the sub-zero temperature. Lifting one hand overhead, Retoc called a halt.

"They'll find out, lord," Hultax persisted. "They'll find out what you did. I know they will. They'll find out it was

you who killed Jlomec, their ruler's brother."

Retoc smiled. The smile made Hultax' blood run cold, for he had seen such a smile before—when Retoc witnessed the execution of disloyal Abarian subjects. The smile hardened on Retoc's face, as if it had frozen there in the cold Nadian wind. "Dismount your steed," he said in a soft voice which only Hultax heard.

Trembling, Hultax obeyed his master's command. His stad, suddenly riderless, pawed nervously at the frost-hardened ground on the edge of the stream. Retoc withdrew his whip-sword and fondled the jewel-encrusted haft. "If you ever say that again, here in Nadia or elsewhere, I will kill you," he warned his lieutenant.

"But the brown girl—"

"The brown girl be damned!" roared Retoc in sudden fury.

"We haven't been able to find her. That day at the cave, she came rushing out, lord, while you—"

"I was detained," Retoc said, some of the passion gone from his voice. He would never forget the sight of the iron-thewed young man, who once had almost strangled him, growing suddenly, in-

credibly transparent, then disappearing. He had stood there, whip-sword in hand, mouth agape, while the brown girl ran past him and—according to what Hultax had told him later—mounted his own stad and vanished across the Ofridian plain.

"But lord, don't you see?" Hultax demanded. "The brown girl knows what happened to Jlomec, prince of the royal Nadian blood. If she attends the royal funeral. She will—"

Retoc laughed. Hultax blanched. He had heard such laughter when enemies of Retoc and thus of Abaria had died in pain. "Fool, fool!" he heard Retoc say now. "Think you a bedraggled wayfaring maid of the Ofridian desert will be invited to the funeral of a prince of the Nadian royal blood?"

"Nevertheless, sire," Hultax persisted, "that day at the cave I took the liberty to send three of our best stadsmen after the girl with orders to capture her or kill her on sight."

Slowly, as a thaw spreads in spring over the broad Nadian ice fields, Retoc smiled at his second in command. Hultax too let his face relax into a grateful grin: until now he had been teeter-

ing on the brink of violent death, and he knew it.

"You may mount," Retoc said.

Hastily Hultax climbed astride his stad. Retoc lifted his arm overhead and made a circular motion with his outstretched hand. The first of the Abarian stads advanced with some reluctance into the swift cold shallow water of the stream.

"What about the white giant?" Hultax asked unwisely when the entire party had reached the other side and Retoc was urging his stad up the slippery bank.

"Have your scouts been able to find the wayfarers who saw him?"

"No, sire. Only the girl nursed him back to health. The others fled."

"And wisely. They have learned to hold their tongues, as you should learn, Hultax. They will give us no trouble. As far as they are concerned, there is no white giant."

"But there is talk of what happened at the Tower, and of Portox' wizardry, and a god who would return; full-grown in exactly a hundred years—"

"Shut up!" Retoc cried, almost screaming the words.

But that night at the Aba-

rian encampment a day and a half's march from Nadia city, Retoc dreamed of Queen Evalla, the lovely Ofridian ruler whose slow death by torture he had relished as the final act of his utter destruction of the once proud Ofridian nation. Evalla in the dream seemed happy and confident. Retoc awoke sweating although frigid winds howled over the Nadian ice-fields. Her confidence sent unknown fear through him.

"Really, it's quite simple," the superbly-muscled prisoner said in the language which was not his own but which he could speak as well as a native. "You see, it wasn't simple at all until I saw what was in the package, but it's quite simple now. In the package was a picture of my mother, the dead Queen Evalla. I am her son. I am of the royal blood. When I saw the picture, it suddenly triggered my memory-responses, as Portox had arranged. Then—"

"What about the old guy in the well?" the trooper asked unimaginatively.

"I'm sorry. I can't answer your questions now. I have to return to my home. The handful of wayfarers who alone are left of a once great nation

are waiting for vengeance. I will . . ."

His voice trailed on, earnestly, politely. The trooper looked at the man from the state mental hospital, who shook his head slowly. They left the powerful, polite prisoner in his cell and went through the corridor to the prison office.

"Real weirdy, huh, doc?" the trooper said.

"A—uh—weirdy to you, but rather cut and dry to me, I'm afraid," Dr. Slonamn said. "Delusions of grandeur and delusions of persecution. Advanced paranoia, I'm afraid."

"It's funny, doc. When they took everything away from him he might hurt himself with, he didn't mind at all. Only the bracelet. Three strong men had to hold him when they took the bracelet."

"Braclet?" Dr. Slonamn said.

"We got it in the office. I'll show you."

The bracelet turned out to be a small, mesh-metal strap as wide around as a big man's upper arm. Attached to the strap was a disc of silvery metal.

"You'd think it was worth a million bucks," the trooper said.

Dr. Slonamn nodded sage-

ly. "Paranoid. It helps confirm the diagnosis. You see, out of touch with the real world, a paranoid can attach great value to utterly worthless objects. Well, I'll write out my report, sergeant."

"Captain Caruthers said to thank you, sir."

"Not at all. Part of my job."

Meanwhile, back in his cell, the prisoner, big hands gripping the bars so tight that his knuckles were white, was thinking: *I've got to make them understand. Somehow I've got to make them understand before it's too late.*

He closed his eyes, lost in intense thought. When he did so, an image swam before his mind's eye. He did not know how this could be, but ascribed it to more of the dead Portox' magic.

What he saw was the barren ice fields of Nadia, with several great caravans making their slow way across the bleak blazing whiteness toward Nadia City. As was the custom in Nadia, the prisoner—whose name was Bram Forest—knew, great funeral games would be held to honor the memory of the late beloved Prince Jlomec. And it was here in frigid Nadia, at such a time as this, when all the royal blood of all the royal

households of Tarth gathered, the wizardry of Portox seemed to tell him, that vengeance would come. Here, if only. . . .

Ylia!

The image blurred. He had seen her once. His knuckles went white as bleached bone on the bars. He concentrated every atom of his will. *Ylia, Ylia!* But now with his eyes shut he saw nothing. With his eyes opened, only the bars of his cell and the cell-block corridor beyond. *Ylia, Ylia! Hear me. There is danger on the road to Nadia. Ylia. . . .*

11

On the Ice Fields of Nadia

B'RONTN the Utalian left footprints in the snow.

Otherwise, B'ronth was invisible. But if a hidden observer watched the Utalian's slow progress across the ice fields of Nadia he would see where the ice was soft or where snow had fallen during the night into the gullies, the unexpected, mysterious appearance of footprints, a left staggered after a right, then another left, then a right again, then a left.

Actually, B'ronth the Utalian was not invisible. But like all Utalians, he was a chameleon of a man. Within seconds his skin would assume

the color of its environment, utterly and completely. Thus, from above B'ronth the Utalian was the dazzling white of the Nadian ice-fields; from below, looking up at the pale cloudless sky, he was cold, transparent blue.

All morning he had been trailing the girl. He had reached her camp on the road to Nadia only moments after she had quit it in company with an old man. From the tattered snow cloaks they wore, they both clearly were wayfarers. B'ronth could have challenged them at once, sprinting across the ice toward them, but he hadn't done that. B'ronth the Utalian was a coward. He accepted the fact objectively: his people were notorious cowards. The proper time would come, he told himself. There would come a time when the girl and the old man were helpless. Then he, B'ronth, would strike.

The day before an Abarian warrior had given him a description of the girl and had promised him a bag of gold for her capture, half a bag of gold if he killed her and could prove it. A bag of gold, he thought. He would take her alive. It was a long, cold road to Nadia City. True, B'ronth the Utalian was small

of stature, a puny creature like all his people. And there were certain disadvantages in his perfect camouflage. He was walking naked across the ice-fields in order to remain unseen. His flesh shivered and his bones were stiff. But a Nadian boy named Lulukee, whom B'ronth had promised half the gold, was not many minutes' march behind him with warm clothing, food, and drink. After he captured the girl. . . .

Invisible, he mounted a rise where solid sheet ice adhered to the shoulder of a rocky hill. Below him, traversing a snow-floored valley and so far away that they were mere dots against the snow, were the old man and the girl.

B'ronth the Utalian chuckled. The sound was swept up instantly and dispersed by the wind. It was a cold wind and it all but froze B'ronth to the marrow, but the Nadian sun was surprisingly warm and now seemed to beam down on him with promise of his golden reward. Shivering both from cold and delight, the invisible Utalian walked swiftly down into the snow-mantled valley.

There would be a trail of footprints for the boy Lulukee to follow . . .

"Cold, Hammeth?" Ylia asked her companion.

"No, girl. I'll manage if you will. Is it much further?"

"Half a day's march to Nadia City yet, I'm afraid," Ylia said. "We could rest if you wish."

The man was extremely old by Tarthian standards, probably three hundred and fifty years old. He wore a snow-cape of *purullian* fur which the wind whipped about his bony frame and up over his completely bald head. "I'm sorry, Ylia," he said suddenly. There were tears in his eyes which the cold and the wind did not explain.

"What for? You came to the cave. You accompanied me here to Nadia."

"When Retoc the Abarian almost killed the White God, I fled with the others."

"If you didn't flee you too might have been slain, Hammeth."

"Yet you remained behind."

"He still lived. Someone had to tend him."

Hammeth's breath came in shallow gasps. He once had been a strong, big man, but the life and the strength had fled his frame when Retoc destroyed Ofrid, a hundred years before. As a wayfarer on the Plains of Ofrid, he had

aged in those hundred years. And he had shrunk and shriveled with approaching senility. "Tell me, Ylia," he asked, panting, "is this Bram Forest you speak of indeed the—the god of the legend? The God of the Tower come to right the ancient wrongs?"

A frown marred the beauty of Ylia's matchless face. "At first," she said with a far-away look in her lovely eyes, "at first I thought he was. Hadn't he come, suddenly, from nowhere, at the ordained moment? But then when he did not slay Retoc, when instead he allowed Retoc the use of his whip-sword and was almost slain by Retoc, when he bled like any mortal, when he—" All at once Ylia was blushing.

"What is it, child?" Hammeth asked.

"Nothing. It is nothing."

"Ylia. You were the infant daughter of a lady in waiting of the royal court of Ofrid. I was a captain of the Queen's Guards. When Retoc's legions brought their death and destruction, I fled to the wilderness with you. I raised you from infancy. I—" the old man's eyes clouded over with emotion—"you have no secrets from me, child."

Ylia was still blushing. But a serene smile replaced the

frown on her face. "Very well, Father Hammeth, I will tell you. There in the cave as I nursed the stranger back to health, as he grew stronger and could move about, as we conversed and came to know each other, I—I desired him."

Hammeth said nothing. His face was stern.

"Please," said Ylia, laughing now that her secret was out. "It wasn't the kind of desire that could make me a candidate for the Golden Ape, but—I desired him. It was a pure, sweet emotion, such as I have never felt before. I wanted him. I wanted to serve him. I wanted to spend my life helping him and . . . Hammeth . . . Father Hammeth . . . loving him. There, I have said it."

Hammeth only muttered. They plodded on through the snow, which here was deep and powdery so they floundered sometimes to their knees.

"But a girl shouldn't feel such desire for a god, so I told myself he was mortal." Abruptly and for no reason that Hammeth could fathom, Ylia began to cry.

"What is it, child? What is it?"

"He—he fled. He had lost much blood and he was weak,

yes, but he didn't even stay to protect me. He fled from Retoc. Is that a god? Is that even a man who can bring retribution to Retoc? Is it, Hammeth? Is it?"

"Yet you're taking the road to Nadia even as legend says the White God will take the road to Nadia."

"Nonsense," said Ylia, wiping away her tears. "Someone has to tell the Nadians what really happened to poor Jlomec, that's all. Retoc, Retoc will have them eating off his hand. He'll have them believing whatever he says. They'll never know that he killed a prince of their royal blood."

But what can Bontarc of Nadia — or anyone — do against the power of Retoc's Abarians?"

"The White God could—"

"Ah, you see? Then perhaps you do believe, after all."

"The White God or whoever he was," said Ylia coldly, "fled a coward from Retoc." She pouted. "And yet, and yet he seemed so confused."

"Perhaps he fled so that the Ofridians might live again in the pride of their greatness," Hammeth declared with vehemence.

"You believe, don't you,

Father Hammeth?" Ylia asked simply.

"I want to believe, child."

"You're panting so. You're tired. We'll have to stop and rest."

They were traversing the deepest part of the valley where the Nadian wind, funneling through between the hills flanking the depression, had piled the snow into drifts twice the height of a man. They hunkered down in the lee of one of the snowdrifts, where the wind could not reach them. With stiff fingers Ylia withdrew strips of jerked stadmear from the inside pocket of her snow cloak, sharing them with Hammeth. They munched the tough cold meat, Ylia looking at the old man with tenderness and affection. Her foster father, he had been the only parent she had ever known. She closed her eyes and for a moment thought back over the years they had spent as wayfarers on the Ofridian Plain, the years dreaming of revenge and succor which would never come, the years. . . .

"Ylia! Ylia!"

Father Hammeth was calling her name, urgently. She shook herself from her reverie. They were seated with their backs to one of the great snow-drifts, where it fell off

suddenly like a suspended, frozen sea wave. With a trembling hand Hammeth was pointing before him, out across the ice fields.

There in the soft snow which mantled the ice of Nadia to a depth of only a few inches, were footprints. They were not old prints, deposited there when some wayfarer had passed. Incredibly, they were being made even as Hammeth and Ylia watched, as if by some creature with no palpable existence. The icy wind seemed intensified.

"It—it's coming toward us," Hammeth said, his voice a croaking whisper. Ylia knew that he was afraid again. Somehow with the advancing years, the steel and fire had gone from Hammeth's heart. Or perhaps, she thought in sympathy, the terrible defeat and destruction of Ofrid a hundred years ago had done this to him, had turned one of the Queen's proven champions into an aging craven wayfarer.

"We'll have to flee," Hammeth said breathlessly.

Behind them was the frozen wave of snow. To the right, far away across the snows, Abaria and the Plains of Ofrid. To the left, not half a day's journey, Nadia City.

Ahead of them, the advancing footprints.

"Your whip-sword!" Ylia cried. "Quickly."

"I carry it, but I can't use it now," Hammeth protested. "I'm an old man, Ylia. An old man."

"Then let me have it."

"You? But you're just a girl. You couldn't—"

"Don't you see, Father Hammeth? It's only a man. A Utalian. It can't be anything else. If he comes in peace, well enough. Otherwise ... here, give me that sword."

But Hammeth shook his head with unexpected pride and pulled the weapon from its scabbard.

Just then the footprints became wider spaced and appeared more quickly in the snow. The invisible Utalian was running toward them. Awkward, cursing at his own impotence, Hammeth fumbled with his weapon.

You who call yourself Bram Forest, Ylia thought, *White God or whatever you are—help us, help us!* Then she hated herself for the unbidden thought. Bram Forest had deserted her once, hadn't he, after she had saved his life? What help could she expect from a man like Bram Forest? Or was Father Hammeth right? Perhaps Bram

Forest had fled so that Ofrid might one day live again to see the wrath of the gods fall on Retoc and his Abarians.

Or, Ylia thought with an abrupt flash of insight, perhaps Bram Forest's flight had been out of his control. Perhaps he was as yet a pawn in a game he barely understood. . . .

Bram Forest, we need you!

The running footprints were almost upon them.

12

Volna the Beautiful

BRAM FOREST had been day-dreaming.

Ylia? Hadn't Ylia been calling his name? But how could that be? Ylia was almost two hundred million miles away. Clearly, as long as they kept the magic disc away from him, he could never see Ylia again. And besides, now that he had been vouchsafed a vision of his dead mother, the former queen of Ofrid, and now that that vision had conjured up the entire tragic past for him, why was it that when he shut his eyes and allowed the bright sun to beat down on the lids through the cell window he saw an image of the sun-browned maid, Ylia?

Could it be, he asked himself, wondering if somehow

he were profaning the memory of the mother he had never known, that Ylia stood not for the past but for the present and the future, and that it was in the present and the unknown future that Bram Forest must live and do his life's work and perhaps perish, although he was motivated from the past?

A guard brought food on a tray. The cell door clanged open, the tray was delivered, the cell door clanged shut. The guard did not pay particular attention to Bram Forest: he had been a docile enough prisoner.

Ylia, he thought.

He knew he must escape next time the guard brought food.

*

Dr. Slonamn held up the bracelet with the metal disc on it and stared curiously at the contraption. He was a psychologist, he could hardly consider himself an expert on metallurgy. Still, he had never seen a metal like that from which the disc had been fashioned. It seemed too opaque for steel, too hard for silver. A steel and silver alloy, then? But he had never heard of a steel and silver alloy.

He held it up to the light. Like a fly's many-faceted eye it threw back manifold im-

ages of—himself. Somehow, it made him dizzy to gaze at the images. He drew his eyes away and had an impulse to fling the strange disc away across the room.

The sun was going down. He heard a clattering from the prison kitchen as the evening meal was prepared. Tomorrow, he thought, should see the completion of his work here. Another interview with the paranoid giant who had brought the disc, perhaps. The disc fascinated him.

He looked at it again. He didn't want to, and recognized the strange compulsion within himself. Then, before he quite realized it, he was staring at his multiple image again. His senses swam. There was a faraway rustling sound like—the words came unbidden to his mind from a poem by Kipling—like the wind that blows between the worlds. He gazed again at the disc. It seemed to draw him, as a magnet draws iron filings. Now he wanted to fight it, wanted to fight with every ounce of his strength. A wave of giddiness swept over him, leaving nausea in its wake. He clutched at the prison-office desk for support. The rustling grew louder.

He saw—or thought he saw—a girl, a lovely, sun-bronzed

girl. There was a look of fear on her face. She seemed to be crying out for help.

An abyss yawned before his feet, before his very soul. He longed despite himself to plunge into the abyss, whatever the fearful consequences might be. He lurched back, fighting the longing. Yet he knew he wouldn't win. He took a step forward. . . .

"Give it to me!"

The voice, urgent, distant, beckoned him back to reality. It seemed a great distance off, but it was something to which he could hold.

"Give me that disc!"

He felt himself dragged roughly back, saw the abyss retreating. The rustling of the wind between the worlds became distant, a sound imagined rather than heard.

"Give it to me!"

He blinked. The nausea had washed over him. He felt weak, drained, exhausted. But the substantial reality of the prison office surrounded him.

The young giant stood before him, strapping the bracelet which held the disc on his powerful arm. A look of intense concentration was on his face. His skin was bathed with sweat although it was cool in the room.

"What did you do to the

guard?" Dr. Slonamn asked, wondering if the prisoner would slay him.

"He'll be all right. I only hit him. I'm sorry. It was necessary." The giant spoke in haste. His eyes were clouded, dreamy, as if he had taken an overdose of barbituates.

"What are you going to do?"

"You saw? In the disc?"

"Yes," said Dr. Slonamn.

"I'm going. It's my home."

The giant took a step forward, then began to stagger.

"Your home?" Dr. Slonamn gasped. "*Your home?*"

The giant, who had given his name to the prison authorities as Bram Forest, did not answer. Dr. Slonamn reached out, as if to grab him. Bram Forest stood there, a smile and the acceptance of pain fighting for mastery of his face.

Dr. Slonamn staggered back as if struck. *His hand had passed through Bram Forest's body.*

Staggering, trembling, Dr. Slonamn leaned for support on the desk. He could see through Bram Forest now. See through him entirely.

A cold fierce wind, like no wind ever felt on Earth, touched him. He shuddered.

When he looked again, Bram Forest was gone . . .

"Retoc the Abarian!" the seneschal's voice proclaimed.

An uneasy stir passed through the crowd of mourning courtiers in the palace chamber. Retoc, ruler of Abaria, did not often visit Nadia. A state of armed tension existed between Abaria and Nadia of the ice fields. Nadia alone of the many disunited nations of Tarth had strength in some ways comparable to that of black forested Abaria, but even then if a war came between the two nations, the issue would never seriously be in doubt.

As a matter of diplomacy, Retoc had been invited to the funeral of Prince Jlomec, although neither Bontarc, ruler of Nadia, nor his sister, Volna the Beautiful, had ever dreamed he would come.

While the crowd milled about in their white mourning garments, Retoc told the seneschal: "I wish an audience with the Princess Volna."

The crowd was suddenly quiet. Volna the Beautiful, haughty, imperious, princess of the royal blood, would certainly refuse to see the Abarian ruler. Nevertheless, the seneschal bowed low, said, "Your request will be carried to the staff of the royal house-

hold, lord," and disappeared behind a hanging.

Some time later, in another part of the palace, Bontarc was saying: "Volna, Volna, listen to me. You can't see that man now."

"I'm going to see him," Volna the Beautiful told her brother. "So it may not be said that a princess of the royal blood hid in fear behind a wall of tragedy."

"But sister! With dear Prince Jlomec still not on the burning barge which will carry him down the River of Ice on the final journey from which—"

"Please, brother," Volna said a little coldly. "I'm going to grant Retoc his audience. Don't you understand? He thinks me weakened by Jlomec's death. Oh, I loved the Prince, yes. He was always so—so quiet and aloof from affairs of state. But I can be strong if strong I have to be."

"Then you won't change your mind?" Bontarc asked. He was a fighting man by nature. The devious paths of diplomacy he set foot on only with reluctance.

For answer Volna said: "Let me prepare to greet the royal visitor." And she watched Bontarc leave her quarters.

At once she clapped her hands. Six serving maids skipped through the hangings into her huge bower and while they clustered jabbering about her like so many excited birds, she undid the fastening at her left shoulder and allowed her gown of mourning white to fall in a crumpled heap at her feet. She stood naked and perfectly still while the serving maids administered to her, each girl a master in one of the cosmetic arts. And Volna, she of the haughty face and glorious body, she who already had been beautiful to look upon, was soon transformed by the cosmetic arts into the loveliest woman the planet Tarth had seen since the Queen Evalla.

Her thoughts went to the dead queen of Ofrid as the maids dressed her again in the mourning garment. Evalla, a woman with beauty to match Volna's, had ruled the most powerful nation Tarth had ever known. Then, Volna smiled, why not another such woman, with hands strong enough, and vision clear enough, to grasp the chalice of power and drink deeply of its heady brew?

"Retoc," she was saying a few moments later.

She clapped her hands. The maids in waiting withdrew, giggling.

"Volna, Volna," said the big Abarian ruler. "You are glorious. Every jek of the journey from the Plains of Ofrid across the ice fields of Nadia, I burned for you." He came very close to her. His face swam before her vision, a hard, strong, handsome face with the cruel eyes of a sadist. Fitting consort for a woman who would rule the world? His lips parted. . . .

Volna, smiling, placed her cool hand over his mouth.

"Then let me put out the fire," she said coolly, "for we have much to discuss."

"But Princess, I—"

"Hush. And what, exactly, were you doing on the Plains of Ofrid?"

Retoc's big face flushed red. Then, when he saw Volna was still smiling, he said: "When we met last, you mentioned that two men stood between you and the throne of Nadia."

"Yes?" said Volna, mocking him, turning swiftly with the light behind her sending its bright beams through the white mourning garment and outlining the seductive curves of her body.

"Jlomec is dead," Retoc said simply.

Still smiling, Volna slapped

the big man's face ringingly. Retoc stepped back, startled.

"Fool!" Volna hissed. "I can call the guards. I can have you slain."

"But I—"

"I did not say I was not pleased. But don't lie to me. That isn't why you slew my brother. Well, man, is it?"

Retoc bowed his head. Only in his eyes there was fury. "We'll make a strange pair, Volna, you and I," he said passionately.

"Is it?"

Retoc shook his head slowly.

"You see? I knew it. I knew it was you when they told us Jlomec had been slain, and yet because I know you and know too how you are quick to passion, I told myself you had not done it consciously because I had suggested it to you. Fool. Can I trust such as you?"

"Only Bontarc stands between you and empire. And Bontarc is a simple man."

"As you are a passionate man."

"Yet you need me, Volna. You need the strength of my arm—and my army. What a pair we'll make!"

Volna stepped into the embrace of his big arms and allowed herself to be kissed. Retoc burned for her. He had

said so. All men burned for her, she knew that. And, before she was finished, every man of Tarth would kneel at her feet and call her Queen.

Retoc drew back finally, breathing hard. Volna had for him only a cool, mocking smile.

At last he said, "There are some who might say Retoc of Abaria killed the royal prince."

"Dolt! Were you seen?"

Retoc shrugged as if it were not important. "A band of wayfarers on the Ofridian Plain. They were so frightened, they fled at once. After I had wounded the white giant."

Volna's eyes flashed suddenly. "There was someone else? You did not kill him?"

"I tried to. He escaped, Princess."

"Then you are more a fool than I thought."

"But I—"

"Begone! We can't be seen together too much. Take quarters in Nadia City, and let me know where you are. You understand?"

"Yes, Princess."

She allowed him to kiss her hand, then he withdrew. A few moments later, at her summons, the seneschal appeared. Subtly her face had

changed. No longer was she the desiring and desirous princess. Instead, she was a grieving sister, whose brother's body still lay in state in the royal palace.

The seneschal, whose name was Proklam, bowed obsequiously. He knew that by custom the body of a royal Nadian floated down the River of Ice in the company of two living servants—one man and one woman—who would perish with him in the Place of the Dead. He knew also that he had been Jlomec's favorite and now lived in constant fear that the Princess Volna would decree that he, Proklam, must accompany his dead master on the Journey of No Return, to serve him in death as he had served him in life.

"Yes, lady?" the frightened Proklam asked.

"Bontarc, our king, grieves mightily for the dead prince," Volna said.

"All Nadia grieves for Jlomec, lady," Proklam said, and added hastily: "Although I must admit I do not grieve more than the next man. No, no, it is a mistake to think I was Jlomec's favorite."

"Be that as it may Bontarc grieves so that for a while at least some of the affairs of state will be in my hands."

"I hear and understand lady."

"Good. If anyone comes—anyone at all, whether wayfarers from Ofrid or others—with news of how Jlomec died, they are to be brought at once to me. Is that understood?"

"Yes, my princess." Proklam the seneschal bowed low once more.

"Serve me well in this, Proklam, and you will be rewarded in measure."

Proklam smiled. "I will be the personification of discretion," he said boldly, baring his toothless old gums.

"Then perhaps I will still the rumors that you were the dead Jlomec's favorite."

Proklam dropped at the royal feet and touched his lips to the royal toes. Then he bowed out of the room.

Volna stared for many moments at her beautiful face in the mirror. Queen, she thought. She said it aloud:

"Queen Volna."

13

The Journey of No Return

EARLIER that day, on the ice fields half a dozen jeks from Nadia City, B'ronth the Utalian had sprinted boldly across the snow toward the girl and her elderly male

companion. This had taken considerable effort, because B'ronth the Utalian had not been endowed with an abundance of courage. But B'ronth was a poor man, as Utalia was a poor country; a bag of gold would be a veritable fortune to him. Like most cowards, B'ronth had one passion which could over-ride his timidity: that passion in B'ronth's case was wealth.

The old man was fumbling clumsily for his whip-sword when B'ronth hurtled at them. The girl screamed:

"Look out, Father Hammeth! Look out!"

B'ronth smiled. They would not see the smile, of course. B'ronth, a chameleon man, was invisible. They would see his footprints in the snow, true. They would know him for a Utalian and understand his invisibility. But still the advantage of invisibility would be his. It had always been so when a Utalian fought. It would always be so.

B'ronth leaped upon the old man even as he prepared to strike out with the whip-sword. B'ronth was both naked and unarmed. The sword lashed whining at air a foot from his face. B'ronth wrenched its haft from the old man's hand. Hammeth stumbled back.

B'ronth swung the whip-sword. He was no duelist. A duelist would lunge and thrust with the whip-sword, allowing its mobile point some degree of freedom by controlling it deftly. A non-duelist like B'ronth would hack and slash, the deadly swordpoint whipping about, curling, slashing, striking.

Hammeth held up his hands to defend himself. The whip-sword whined in the cold air. The girl screamed. Hammeth's right hand flew from his arm and blood jetted from the stump. Hammeth sank to the ground and lay there in a spreading pool of crimson. His eyes remained open. He was staring with hatred at B'ronth. In a matter of minutes, B'ronth knew, he would bleed to death. B'ronth turned on the girl.

She stood before him swaying. She had almost swooned, but as B'ronth approached her, she flung herself at him, crying Hammeth's name, and they both fell down in the snow. B'ronth let the whip-sword fall from his fingers. Half a bag of gold for a dead girl, but the whole bag if she lived. She fought like a wild cat and for a few moments B'ronth regretted dropping the weapon and actually feared for his life. But soon, his

courage returning and his whole being contemplating the bag of gold, he subdued the girl.

She lay back exhausted in the snow. "Please," she said. "Please bind his arm. He'll bleed to death. Please."

B'ronth said nothing. Ylia staggered to her feet, then collapsed and crawled on her knees to Hammeth. The blood jetted from the stump of his arm. He was watching her. A little smile touched the corners of his mouth but pain made his eyes wild.

B'ronth licked his lips. He had earned his bag of gold and, earning it, thought of more wealth. He thought: *why should I accept one bag of gold from a common Abarian soldier when there are millions of bags of gold in Nadia City?* He could deliver the girl, who obviously knew something the Abarians did not wish the Nadians to know, to Nadia City. He could sell her to the Nadians. Or, if the Abarians outbid them, then the Abarians. . . .

Bruised, her cloak in tatters, Ylia reached Hammeth. His eyes blinked. He smiled at her again, smiling this time with his whole face. Then he turned his head away and his eyes remained open and staring.

"You . . . killed . . . him," Ylia said, sobbing.

B'ronth dragged her to her feet. "Lulukee!" he called. "Lulukee!" Where was the boy?

Lulukee did not answer. Cursing, B'ronth stripped the corpse and dressed in its warm clothing. The blood on the right sleeve was already stiff with cold. Where could Lulukee have gone off to? wondered B'ronth. Well, no matter. They were only a few jeks from Nadia City, where wealth awaited him. . . .

"Come," he said. He dragged the girl along. She looked back at the dead old man until a snow drift hid him from sight.

After the Utalian had dragged the beautiful girl beyond the ridges of snow, Lulukee the Nadian came down into the valley. He was a small boy of some sixty winters who, like many of the Nadians who did not come from their country's single large city, had lived a hard life as an ice-field nomad. He had seen an opportunity to profit in the service of B'ronth the Utalian, but had not expected this service to include murder. Thus when the Utalian had called him, expecting the boy to drag his supply sled

down into the snow-valley, Lulukee had remained hidden. Now, though, he made his way to the body of the dead man and, scavengerlike, went over it with the hope of turning a profit by B'ronth's deed.

In that he was disappointed. B'ronth had taken the dead man's snow cloak and his whip-sword: there was nothing left for Lulukee's gleaning. He was about to turn and trudge back the way he had come, when he realized that if he did so, if he exposed himself on the higher wind-ridges, B'ronth might see him. Therefore he remained a long time with the frozen body of Father Hammeth, actually falling into a light slumber while he waited.

He awoke with a start. He blinked, then cowered away from the apparition which confronted him. It was a man, but such a man as Lulukee the Nadian had never seen before, a superbly muscled man a head taller than the tall Abarians themselves.

"Where's the girl?" the man demanded.

"I—I don't know, lord."

"How did this happen?" The man looked down with compassion at Father Hammeth's corpse.

"I only just arrived, l-lord."

"You lie," the big man said. "You were sleeping here. You'll tell me, or—"

Lulukee blanched. He owed no loyalty to B'ronth the Uthalian. If indeed he remained loyal he might be implicated in the murder of the old man. He said: "It was B'ronth the Uthalian."

"Where is he?"

"G-going to Nadia City, I think."

"Alone?"

"No, lord. With his prisoner. A—a lovely woman."

"Ylia!" the giant cried. "You! How are you called?"

"I am Lulukee of Nadia, lord."

"Lead me to the city. Lead me after them."

"But lord—"

"Lead me." The giant did not shout. He did not menace or glower or threaten. Yet there was something in his bearing which made it impossible for the frightened Lulukee to do anything but obey. "Yes, lord," he said.

"Tell me—" as they started out, the boy's sled reluctantly left behind—"is this B'ronth the Uthalian in Retoc's pay?"

"No, I don't think so. He works alone, lord. Reaping profit wherever he can."

"And he took the girl unwillingly?"

"Yes, lord."

"He won't profit in this venture," Bram vowed.

The wind howled behind them. Six jeks ahead of them was Nadia City.

*

"Can't you see I'm busy? Can't you see I have no time for the likes of you?" Proklam the seneschal whined in self-pity.

"Then make time," B'ronth said boldly, his cowardice obscured by dreams of avarice. "What I have brought through the Ice Gates is important to your ruler."

"Bontarc of Nadia," said the seneschal haughtily, "does not waste his time on every Utalian vagabond who reaches his court."

"True. But I assume Bontarc of Nadia wishes to know exactly how his brother, the Prince Jlomec, died?"

Proklam fought to keep his puckered old face impassive. But his mind was racing and his heart throbbed painfully. Could the Utalian know anything about that? If so, and if he, Proklam, brought this B'ronth before the Princess Volna as she had ordered. . . .

"Wait here," Proklam snapped arrogantly. "And keep your cloak on. We don't want invisible Utalians floating about the palace."

B'ronth offered a mock bow. Proklam turned to go, then whirled about again. "If you're lying, wasting my time—"

B'ronth smiled unctuously. "In the ante-room, being amused by your palace guards, is one who has been on the Plains of Ofrid quite recently."

"So?"

"When the Prince Jlomec was there. She saw him slain."

"Wait here," said Proklam a little breathlessly. He pushed the hanging aside and stalked down a corridor, and around a bend, and up a flight of stone stairs. He was busy; all right. That had been no lie. Preparations must be made for the funeral games of the Prince Jlomec, to which all the nobility of Tarth had been invited. But this, obviously, was more important. On this Proklam's life might depend. . . .

"Are they checking way-passes, lord?" Lulukee asked the big, silent man at his side. Ahead of them, filing slowly through the Ice Gates, were hundreds of visitors entering Nadia City for the funeral games. A flat-bottomed air-car hovered overhead, peltasts leaning over its sides, ready. Guards flanked the Ice Gates

with drawn whip-swords, as if admitting the superiority of Abarian weapons of war.

"We'll get through," Bram Forest vowed. "Tell me, Luluk-ee, if you brought a prisoner to the city who might be worth much to the Abarians but also to the Nadians, and if you were intent on getting the biggest profit, where would you take her?"

"If I had great courage, lord?"

"If you dreamed of reward."

"I would take her to the royal palace, lord, to Bontarc the King or to his sister, Princess Vólna the Beautiful, who, some say, is the real power behind the Nadian throne although Bontarc is a great soldier."

They had reached the gate. "Way passes," a bored guard said.

Luluk-ee mumbled something uncertainly. His heart beat painfully against his ribs. His brain refused to function. There was intrigue here, he could sense that. More intrigue than he cared to have a hand in. As a Nadian citizen, he owned a way pass, of course. But the giant? Obviously the giant did not. Luluk-ee was sorry he had ever agreed to go along with

B'ronth the Utalian. Now he only wanted to get out of the entire situation as quickly—and safely—as possible.

He pointed an accusing finger at Bram Forest. "He has no way pass!" Luluk-ee cried.

The guards stiffened, their whip-swords ready. They looked at Bram Forest. Overhead, the air-car hovered, its peltasts stationed there in the event of trouble, their slings poised.

Ylia was in there somewhere, a prisoner. Bram Forest spurned violence for its own sake, but Ylia might need him. Ylia, who had nursed him back to health when Retoc had left him for dead on the parched Plains of Ofrid. Ylia, the lovely.

"I'm going through," Bram Forest said softly. "Don't try to stop me."

For answer, the nearest guard let his left hand drop.

It had been a signal. Overhead, the peltasts drew back their slings. "Will you go in peace?" the guard asked, his eyes narrow slits now, his right arm tensed to bring the whip-sword around.

Bram Forest waited. Every muscle in his superbly-conditioned body cried for action, but he would not initiate it.

The guard pointed back along the path across the ice

fields, where hundreds of visitors to the city were waiting impatiently. "Then go," he said harshly, "before your flesh feeds the stilt-birds on the banks of the River of Ice."

The guard raised his sword menacingly. Standing rigidly still and giving no warning, Bram Forest lashed out with his left fist, hitting the guard in the mouth. Lips split, teeth flew, blood covered the guard's face. Someone screamed. The guard fell, but his companion lashed out with his own whip-sword. Bram Forest lunged to one side and grabbed the sword-arm, twisting it. The guard howled, dropping his weapon. Lulukee made a dive for it. But the guard, his legs still free, kicked Lulukee in the face. As he fell, his senses blurring, Lulukee wondered why he had made that desperate, foolish attempt to help the big, silent man. He could not answer the question in mere words. But there was something about him, something about Bram Forest, which drew loyalty from you even as the sun drew dew from the ground. . . .

Bram Forest lifted the second guard by sword-girdle and scruff of neck and held

him aloft. The guard's arms and legs flailed frantically. "No!" he screamed up at the peltasts. "No . . ."

But they had already unleashed their first volley of stones, pelting the helpless guard until he lost consciousness. Bram Forest flung him aside, leaped over the first fallen guard's supine body, and plunged recklessly into the crowds milling just inside the Ice Gates.

"He went that way!" a voice screamed.

"That way!"

"Over there!"

"There he is!"

It was an ancient city, with narrow, tortuous alleyways and overhanging buildings and little-used passageways. The wide streets—the few there were—mobbed with people.

For all his size, the giant had disappeared.

Lulukee picked himself up, dusted himself off, and showed his way pass to the guard. The guard said nothing. He had lost three teeth and his mouth was swollen, painful. Lulukee sensed that somehow the little he had done to help Bram Forest was all he would ever do for him. Yet he felt with a strange pride he did not fathom that although his role in the saga of the myste-

rious giant had come to an end, it was the most important event in his life and would remain so if he lived to be six-hundred. He felt somehow—and could not explain why he felt this—as if in his small way he had done something to make the world TARTH a better place in which to live.

Whistling, he pushed his way through the crowds and was lost to sight just as the giant who went before him.

*

"B'ronth of Utalia!" Prokliam the seneschal proclaimed. Volna the Beautiful nodded. The doddering old seneschal had already told her about the Utalian. She was prepared to receive him now. If he knew what he claimed to know, if he knew the true details of the death of Prince Jlomec, then he must be silenced. Naturally, he wanted gold. They always wanted gold. But gold was not the way to silence them. Gold never worked. It only made them greedy for more.

With Volna were, instead of her usual ladies in waiting, two discreet palace guards. Grinning, she looked at their whip-swords. That was the way to silence one such as B'ronth the Utalian.

"He may enter," Volna told

the seneschal. Prokliam bowed out, saying:

"And Princess, you will not forget—"

"No, Prokliam, I won't forget. You hardly knew the Prince Jlomec at all, did you? You certainly couldn't have been his favorite."

"Princess," breathed the seneschal tremulously as he withdrew.

A moment later, B'ronth the Utalian entered the royal chamber. He wore a snow-cloak. He was all but invisible except for the snow-cloak. He was, eerily, a disembodied cloak floating through air. Although, noticed Volna, if you looked closely you could see the faintest suggestion of a man's head above the cloak, as if you saw the rich wall tapestries of the room through a transparent, head-shaped glass. Likewise, the suggestion of arms and legs. . . .

"You are B'ronth?" An unnecessary question, but Volna had not yet made up her mind what must be done.

"Yes, majesty," the cloak said in a different but somehow unctuous voice.

"You are alone?"

"No, majesty," said the cloak.

"Then—?"

"A girl. A wayfarer of the

Plains of Ofrid. I accompany her."

"And the story you have to tell?"

"I realize, majesty, how the royal Princess must grieve at the loss of her royal brother, the Prince. I realize . . ."

"To the point, man. Get to the point. Are you trying to say you know how Prince Jlomec was slain? You know who killed him?"

"Yes," said the cloak boldly, eagerly.

Princess Volna smiled. Perhaps something in that smile warned B'ronth the Utalian. But of course, the warning came too late. In a quick jerky motion, the cloak retreated toward the doorway. "Princess . . ." B'ronth said.

Princess Volna told her guards: "Kill him."

B'ronth the Utalian had time for one brief scream which, if a sound could, seemed to embody all his frustrated dreams of wealth. Then one of the guards moved swiftly, his arm streaking out. The whip-sword in his hand lashed, blurring, toward the cloak. Bright red blood welled, jetted.

B'ronth the Utalian's head, no longer invisible, rolled on the floor at Volna's lovely feet. "Clean that up," she told one of the guards. To the

other she said: "Now fetch the girl."

"Mind, lord, I don't question you," Hultax the Abarian said. "But it's just—"

"Did you send the message?" Retoc cut him off.

"As you ordered, sire. Yes."

"Good."

"Sire, I hate inactivity. I loathe it. I am a soldier."

"As I am," said Retoc slowly, his hard cruel eyes staring at something Hultax could not—and would never be able to—see.

"So we just sit here in this rented house in Nadia City, cooling our heels. It doesn't make sense, sire."

"Sense?" mused Retoc. "What is sense? Is it victory and power for the strongest? Well, is it?"

"Yes, lord," Hultax responded. "But—"

"And you sent the message? Our legions will come?"

"Yes, lord. Two days hence they'll be encamped on the ice fields three jeks march from the city gates. But I don't see—"

"You obey, Hultax. I see. I do the seeing."

But I thought you . . . the Princess Volna . . . together . . ."

"The Princess can serve me, now. If she can deliver

Nadia without a fight, then Tarth is mine, Hultax, don't you see? In two days all the royal blood of all the royal families of Tarth will be assembled here in Nadia for the funeral games. If Bontarc's army doesn't interfere, then I will be master of Tarth."

"But if Bontarc finds out—"

"That, Hultax," said Retoc with a smile, "is why you sent the message."

"My sire," said the proud soldier Hultax humbly.

Soon, thought Retoc, all Tarth would call him that. *My sire*. . . .

*

Ahead of Bram Forest loomed the ramparts of the palace. He must hurry. He knew he had to hurry. He pushed impatiently through the crowd. Several times men looked up angrily, and would have said something. But when they saw his face, they turned away.

What they saw in Bram Forest's face made them afraid.

"Majesty?" Prokliam the seneschal said.

"Well?" Volna demanded. "Didn't the guards send you for the girl?"

"Majesty, I was thinking . . ."

"Well, Prokliam, what is

it? Didn't you go for the girl?"

"Not yet, majesty, begging your pardon . . ."

"If you have something to say, then say it. And get the girl."

"Majesty, a seneschal knows the palace. It is his job . . ."

"I warn you, Prokliam, I have little patience today." Her anxiety was evident.

"No one wishes to be chosen," Prokliam blurted quickly, boldly, "even as I did not wish to be chosen to accompany the body of Prince Jlomec on the Journey of No Return. Now that you have spared me, in your royal benevolence, I thought I might in turn advise you . . ."

"Yes, what is it, man?"

"You should not have killed the Utalian, majesty. If it is ordained that a living man and a living woman accompany the Prince's body to the Place of the Dead, to die there with him, their spirits serving him in death, why choose from among the palace staff? We all have family, we all have friends, we all stand something to lose. But majesty, if you were to break with tradition, if you were to send instead two strangers whose loss meant nothing to the palace, the palace staff would love and revere you

even more than they already do."

Volna's beautiful face smiled at him. He did not know what she was thinking. He never knew. No one did. She might reward him or have him slain on the spot. "Why do you tell me this, Prokliam?" she asked.

"For saving me when it was thought I would accompany—"

"No. There must be another reason."

"If you do this deed and if the palace and the people love you for it, and if the scepter of power should slip from Bontarc's hand to yours, and if, when it came time to select your prime minister . . ."

"Ha! Ha! Ha! We have an ambitious palace butler."

"But surely you—"

"Yes, Prokliam. I understand. I won't deny it. Perhaps I had the Utalian slain impetuously. But there's still the girl."

"I'll fetch her at once, majesty."

"And if," mused Volna, no longer aware of the seneschal's presence, "we could find another stranger, a man, to accompany the body of Prince Jlomec on the Journey of No Return, not only the palace, but the people as well

would love me. A stranger . . ."

"Take me to your King," Bram Forest told the palace guard.

The guard smirked. "Do you think any stranger in the realm is granted an audience with King Bontarc, fool?"

"It is a matter of life and death."

"But whose life and death?" demanded the guard, roaring with laughter. "Yours, idiot?"

"It is about Ylia the Wayfarer."

"I know of no Ylia the Wayfarer. Begone, dolt!"

"It is about Prince Jlomec."

The guard's eyes narrowed. The word had been passed by no less a person than Prokliam the seneschal that anyone with information concerning the death of the royal Prince should be brought at once not to Bontarc but to Princess Volna. Could the guard, could he, Porfis, do less?

"Very well," he said. "Come with me."

Unarmed, but aware of his giant's strength and the mission which had seen him spend the first hundred years of his life in a crypt on Earth, Bram Forest went with the guard.

The way was long, through

chambers in which priceless tapestries hung, through narrow, musty corridors into which the light of day barely penetrated, through rooms in which ladies in waiting and courtiers talked and joked, up bare stone stairs and through heavy wooden doors which Porfis the guard opened with a key which hung at his belt. The doors opened slowly.

Bram Forest entered a large room. It was, he could see at a glance, a woman's bower. Someone was standing at the far end of the room, in shadow. He squinted. He took two slow steps into the room. He began to run.

"Ylia! Ylia!" he cried.

Too late he saw the fetters binding her arms. Too late he saw her bite savagely at something and twist her neck and spit the gag from her

mouth. Too late he heard her cry:

"Bram! Bram Forest! Behind you!"

He turned barely in time to see Porfis the guard, his whip-sword raised overhead hilt-first. He lifted his arm, but it was swept aside in the downward rush of the sword. Something exploded behind his eyes and all eternity seemed to open beneath his feet. He plunged into blackness with Ylia's name on his lips.

Unconscious, he was taken with Ylia through subterranean passages to the Royal Dock on the River of Ice. The barge with Jlomec's embalmed body waited. It was very cold on the river. The Place of the Dead beckoned from the unseen end of the Journey of No Return.

(To be continued)

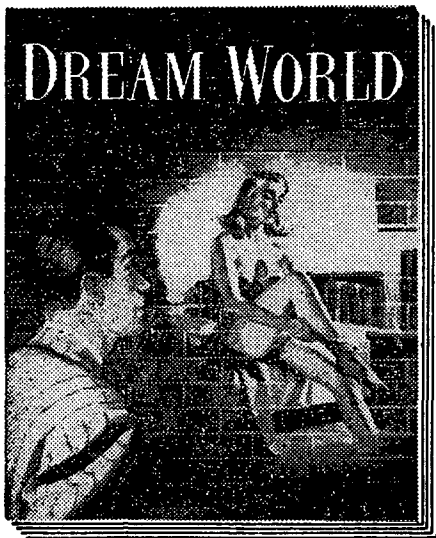
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Finally, Margot, remember this. If you presented this letter to the evolutionary scientists on any of the worlds, they'd laugh at you. It is as if unbelief of the proto-man legend were ingrained in all the planetary people, perhaps somehow fantastically carried from generation to generation in their genes because proto-man a million years ago decided that each stellar world must work out its own destiny independently of the others and independent of their common heritage. But in my own case, there are apparently two unique factors at work. In the first place, as you know, I deciphered—after discovering it quite by accident—what was probably a proto-man's dying message to his children, left a million years ago in the ruins on Arcturus II. In the second place, isn't it quite possible that my genes have changed, that I have mutated and therefore do not have as an essential part of my make-up the unbelief of the proto-man legend?

Good luck to you, Margot. I hope you're willing to give up your career to carry out your dying father's wish. If you do, and if you succeed, more power will be yours than a human being has ever be-

(Continued from page 23)

fore had in the galaxy. I won't presume to tell you how to use it.

Oh, yes. One more thing. Since Earth and Alpha Centauri are on a direct line from Irvadi, Centauri will do quite well as your outbound destination if for some reason you can't make Earth. Again, good luck, my child. With all my love, Dad.

Ramsey frowned at the letter. He did not know what to make of it. As far as he knew, there was no such thing as a proto-man myth in wide currency around the galaxy. He had never heard of proto-man. Unless, he thought suddenly, the dying man could have simply meant all the myths of human creation, hypothecating a first man who, somehow, had developed independently of the beasts of the field although he seemed to fit their evolutionary pattern. . . .

But what the devil would hyper-space have to do with such a myth? Proto-man, whatever proto-man was, couldn't have lived in hyper-space. Not in that bleak, ugly, faceless infinity. . . .

Unless, Ramsey thought, more perplexed than ever, it was the very bleak, ugly,

faceless infinity which made proto-man leave.

"Breakfast!" the Vegan girl called. Ramsey joined her in the kitchen, and they ate without talking. When they were drinking their coffee, an Earth-style beverage which the Vegan girl admitted liking, the apartment door irised and Margot Dennison came in.

Ramsey, who had replaced the letter where he'd found it, said: "Just what the devil did you think you were doing, locking us in?"

"For your own protection, silly," Margot told him smoothly. "I always lock my door when I go out, so I locked it today. Naturally, we won't have a chance to apply for a new lock. Besides, why arouse suspicion?"

"Where'd you go?"

"I don't see where that's any of your business."

"Believe it or not," Ramsey said caustically, "I've seen a thousand credits before. I've turned down a thousand credits before, in jobs I didn't like. As for being stranded here on Irwadi, it's all the same to me whether I'm on Irwadi or elsewhere."

"What does all that mean, Captain Ramsey?"

"It means keep us informed. It means don't get uppity."

Margot laughed and dropped a vidcast tape on the table in front of Ramsey. He read it and did not look up. There was a description of himself, a description of the Vegan girl, and a wanted bulletin issued on them. For assaulting the Chief of Irwadi Security, the bulletin said. For assaulting a drunken fool, Ramsey thought.

"Well?" Margot asked. This morning she wore a man-tailored jumper which, Ramsey observed, clashed with the Sirian-archaic furniture. She looked cool and completely poised and no less beautiful, if less provocatively dressed, than last night.

Ramsey returned question for question. "What about the ship?"

"In a Spacer Graveyard, of course. There isn't a landing field on the planet we could go to."

"You mean we'll take off from a Graveyard? From a junk-heap of battered old derelict ships?"

"Of course. It has some advantages, believe it or not. We'll work on the ship nights. It needs plenty of work, let me tell you. But then the Graveyard is a kind of parts department, isn't it?"

Ramsey couldn't argue with that.

They spent the next three days sleeping and slowly going stir-crazy. They slipped out each night, though, and walked the two miles to the Spacer Graveyard down near the river. It was on the other side of the river, which meant they had to boat across. Risky, but there was no help for it. Each night they worked on the ship, which Ramsey found to be a fifty-year old Canopusian freighter in even worse condition than Margot had indicated. The night was usually divided into three sections. First, reviewing the work which had been done and planning the evening's activities. Then, looking for the parts they would need in the jungle of interstellar wrecks all about them. Finally, going to work with the parts they had found and with the tools which Ramsey had discovered on the old Canopusian freighter the first night.

As they made their way back across the river the first night, Ramsey paddling slowly, quietly, Margot said:

"Ramsey, I—I think we're being watched."

"I haven't seen or heard a thing. You, Vardin?" Vardin was the Vegan girl's name.

Vardin shook her head.

Ramsey was anxious all at once, though. Things had gone too smoothly. They had not been interfered with at all. Personally, things hadn't gone smoothly with Ramsey, but that was another story. He found himself liking Margot Dennison too much. He found himself trying to hide it because he knew she could read minds. Just how do you hide your thoughts from a mind reader? Ramsey didn't know, but whenever his thoughts drifted in that direction he tried thinking of something else — anything else, except the proto-man letter.

"Yes, that's just what I was thinking," Margot said in the boat. "I can read minds, so I'd know best if we were being watched. To get a clear reading I have to aim my thoughts specifically, but I can pick up free-floating thoughts as a kind of emotional tone rather than words. Does that make sense?"

"If you say so. What else did you read in my mind?"

Margot smiled at him mysteriously and said nothing.

Ramsey felt thoughts of proto-man nibbling at his consciousness. He tried to fight them down purely rationally, and knew he wouldn't succeed. He grabbed Margot and

pulled her close to him, seeking her lips with his, letting his thoughts wander into a fantasy of desire.

Margot slapped his face and sat stiffly in her cloak while he paddled to the other side of the river. Vardin sat like a statue. Ramsey had come to a conclusion: he did not like letting Margot know how he felt about her, but it was mostly on a straight physical level and he preferred her discovering it to her learning that he'd read the proto-man letter from her father. In his thoughts, though, he never designated it as the proto-man letter from her father. He designated it as X.

When they reached the bank, Margot said: "I'm sorry for slapping you."

"I'm sorry for making a pass."

"Ramsey, tell me, what is X?"

Ramsey laughed harshly and said nothing. That gave Margot something to think about. Maybe it would keep her thoughts out of his mind, keep her from reading. . . .

X marks the spot, thought Ramsey. XXX marks the spot-spot-spot. X is a spot in a pot or a lot of rot. . . .

"Oh, stop it!" Margot cried irritably. "You're thinking nonsense."

"Then get the heck out of my mind," Ramsey told her.

Vardin walked on without speaking. If she had any inkling of what they were talking about, she never mentioned it.

Margot said: "I still get the impression."

"What impression?"

"That we're being followed. That we're being watched. Every step of the way."

Wind and cold and darkness. The hairs on the back of Ramsey's neck prickled. They walked on, bent against the wind.

Security Officer Second Class Ramar Chind reported to his Chief in the Hall of Retribution the following morning. Chind, a career man with the Irwadi Security Forces, did not like his new boss. Garr Symm was no career man. He knew nothing of police procedure. It was even rumored — probably based upon solid fact—that Garr Symm liked his brandy excessively and often found himself under its influence. Worst of all—after all, a man could understand a desire for drink, even if, sometimes, it interfered with work—worst of all, Garr Symm was a scientist, a dome-top in the Irwadi vernacular. And hard-

headed Ramar Chind lost no love on dome-tops.

He saluted crisply and said: "You wanted to see me, sir?"

Garr Symm leaned forward over his desk, making a tent of his scaly green fingers and peering over it. He said three words. He said: "The Earth-girl Dennison."

"The Spacer Graveyard," Ramar Chind said promptly. That was an easy one. His agents had been following the Dennison girl, at Garr Symm's orders. Ramar Chind did not know why.

"And?" Garr Symm asked.

"The Earthman Ramsey, the Vegan Vardin, both are with her. We can close in and arrest the lot, sir, any time you wish."

"Fool," Garr Symm said softly, without malice. "That is the last thing I want. Don't you understand that? No, I guess you don't."

"Yes, sir."

"Their ship?"

"Every morning after they leave we go over it. Still two or three nights away from completion, sir. Also—" Ramar Chind smiled.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Two or three nights away from completion, except for one thing. They'll need a fuel

supply. Two U-235 capsules rigged for slow implosion, sir. The hopper of their ship is empty."

"Is there such a fuel supply in the Graveyard?"

"No, sir."

"But could there be?"

"Usually, no. Naturally, the junkers drain out spaceship hoppers before scrapping them. U-235 in any form brings—"

"I know the value of U-235. Proceed."

"Well, there could be. If they were lucky enough to find such a fuel supply in one of the wrecks in the Graveyard, they wouldn't be suspicious. Naturally, we won't put one there."

"But you're wrong, my dear Ramar Chind. You'll load the hopper of one of those wrecks with enough U-235 for their purposes, and you'll do it today."

"But sir—"

"We're going to follow them, Chind. You and I. We want them to escape. If they don't escape, how can we follow them?"

Ramar Chind shrugged resignedly and lisped: "How much fuel will they need for their purposes, sir, whatever their purposes are?" Naturally, his lisping sounded perfectly normal to Garr Symm,

who also spoke in the sibilantless Irwadi manner.

"You'd really like to know, wouldn't you?" Garr Symm said.

"Yes, sir. To put me in a position in which I could better do my—"

"To satisfy your curiosity, you mean!"

"But sir—"

"I am a scientist, Chind."

"Yes, sir."

"Didn't it strike you as odd that a scientist should be elevated to the top post in your department?"

"Of course, sir. I didn't question it, though."

"As you know, Chind, when it was decided to planetarize Irwadi as a first step toward driving away the outworlders, the quarters of every outworlder on Irwadi were thoroughly searched."

"I participated in the—uh, program, sir."

"Good. Then I needn't tell you. Something was found in Margot Dennison's apartment. Something of immense importance. Something so important that, if used properly, it can assure Irwadi the dominant place in the galaxy for all time to come."

"But I thought Irwadi craved isolation—"

"Isolation, Chind? To be

sure, if intercourse with the other galactic powers saw us at the bottom of the heap. But at the top—who would crave isolation at the top?"

"I see, sir. And the something that was found needed a scientist?"

"Very perceptive of you, Chind. Precisely. It was a letter. We copied it. Of course, Margot Dennison knows more than what is in the letter; the letter alludes to previous information. We need Dennison and Ramsey. We have to let them go ahead with their plans. Then we follow them, Chind. You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"You're a good policeman, Chind. The best we have, I understand. You'll be going with me—on the most important assignment you or any Irwadian ever had."

"I am grateful, sir, that you consider me—"

"Now, see about that U-235 slow-implosion capsule."

"At once, sir."

Saluting smartly, Ramar Chind left Garr Symm's office. Symm smiled and sat perfectly still for some minutes. For Irwadi, yes, he was thinking. Certainly for Irwadi. For Irwadi absolutely. To make Irwadi the most important planet in the galaxy. But important planets—in

the way that Irwadi would be important—couldn't maintain the status quo. For example, Irwadi's form of government might have to be changed. At present, an autocratic bureaucracy with no one man at the top. Ultimately, after the rediscovery of proto-man's secret—rule by one man.

Garr Symm, absolute dictator of the galaxy, if he played his hand right.

Garr Symm sat there for a long time, dreaming of power as no man before him on any world had ever dreamed of power. . . .

Vardin rushed into the airlock of the Canopusian freighter in a state of excitement. At last they had given her something to do, and she had been successful at the outset. Specifically, Ramsey and the beautiful woman had given her a scintillation-counter and told her to prowls among the wrecks with it while they worked on the control board of the freighter, which the beautiful woman had named *Enterprise*.

"I found it!" Vardin cried. "I found it!"

She led a sceptical Margot Dennison outside while Ramsey continued working on the *Enterprise*. The two girls

walked swiftly through the darkness between the wrecks. By this time they knew every foot of the Graveyard.

"There," Vardin said. "You see?"

The scintillation counter was clicking and blinking. Margot smiled and went to work with a portable mechanical arm and a leaded bottle. In ten minutes, she had the slow-implosion capsule out of the hopper of a battered old Aldeberanese cargo ship.

"I never saw one of those mechanical arms working before," Vardin said.

Margot smiled. She was delighted with the timid Vegan girl, with the cold night, with the way the wind blew across the Graveyard, with everything. They had their fuel. Tomorrow night the *Enterprise* would be ready for its dash into hyper-space. In thirty-six hours she might have her hands on the most valuable find in the history of mankind. . . .

When they returned to the *Enterprise*, she let Ramsey kiss her and tried to slip the telepathic tentacles of her mind behind his guard—

Lewd libidinous fantasies, X stands for nothing for nothing for nothing, XXX—she got nowhere.

What was X? What was

Ramsey's secret? Margot did not know, and wondered if she would ever find out.

She smiled, reading Vardin's mind. For Vardin was thinking: it must be so wonderful to have beauty such as she has, to melt the wills of strong handsome men such as Ramsey. It must be truly wonderful.

For the first twenty-eight years of her life, Margot Dennison would have agreed, would have delighted in her own beauty. She still did, to a point. But beyond that point, she could dream only of proto-man and his secret.

Beauty or power?

She had beauty.

She wanted power.

In the early hours of the following morning, behind the cover of what appeared to be a dense early morning fog but what actually was an artificially produced fog, a team of Irwadi technicians swarmed all over a battered Procyonian cruiser of three thousand tons. By mid-morning, working swiftly and with all the tools and spare parts they would need, they made the ship, called *Dog Star*, space-worthy.

Later that day, but still two hours before nightfall, Ramar Chind arrived with a

small crew of three Security Police. He had selected his men carefully: they knew how to handle a spaceship, they knew how to fight, they were quite ruthless. He thought Garr Symm would be pleased.

Symm did not arrive until just before nightfall. He was very agitated when he came. Ramar Chind, too, was eager. What would happen within the next several hours, he realized, might be beyond his ken, but he still recognized its importance. And, being an opportunist, he would pounce on whatever he found of value to himself. . . .

Several hours after the setting of the Irwadi primary had ushered in the cold night, Margot Dennison, Ramsey and Vardin arrived at the Graveyard and made their way at once to the *Enterprise*. They went inside swiftly and in a very few minutes prepared the thousand-tonner for blastoff. Ramsey's mouth was dry. He could barely keep the thoughts of proto-man from his mind. If Margot read them. . . .

"Centauri here we come," he said, just to talk.

"Centauri," said Margot.

But of course, she had another destination in mind.

Several hundred yards

across the Graveyard, watching, waiting, the occupants of *Dog Star* were armed to the teeth.

Ramsey sat at the controls. Vardin stood behind him nervously. The space trip from Vega to Irwadi was probably the only one she had ever taken. Margot sat, quite relaxed, in the co-pilot's chair.

"I still can't believe we're not going to feel anything," Vardin said in her soft, shy voice.

"Haven't you ever been through hyper-space before?" Margot asked the Vegan girl.

"Just once."

"In normal space," Ramsey explained, "we feel acceleration and deceleration because the increase or decrease in velocity is experienced at different micro-instants by all the cells of our body. In hyper-space the velocity is felt simultaneously in all parts of the ship, including all parts of us. We become weightless, of course, but the change is instant and we feel no pressure, no pain."

Ramsey was waiting until 0134:57 on the ship chronometer. At that precise instant in time, and at that instant only, blastoff would place them on the proper hyper-space orbit. And, before they could feel the mounting pres-

sure of blastoff, the timelessness of hyper-space would intervene.

"0130:15," Margot read the chronometer for Ramsey. "It won't be long now. 30:20—"

"All right," Ramsey said suddenly. "All right. I can read the chronometer."

"Why, Ramsey! I do believe you're nervous."

"Anxious, Margot. A hyper-pilot is always anxious just before crossover. You've got to be, because the slightest miscalculation can send you fifty thousand light years off course."

"So? All you'd have to do is re-enter hyper-space and go back."

Ramsey shook his head. "Hyper-space can only be entered from certain points in space. We've never been able to figure out why."

"What certain points?"

Ramsey looked at her steadily. "Points which vary with the orbits of the three thousand humanoid worlds, Margot," he said slowly. He watched her for a reaction, knowing that strange fact about hyper-space—perfectly true and never understood—dovetailed with her father's letter about proto-man, an unknown pre-human ancestor

of all the humanoid races in the galaxy, who had discovered hyper-space, bred variations to colonize all the inhabitable worlds, found or created the three thousand crossover points in space, and used them.

Margot showed no response, but then, Ramsey told himself, she was a tri-di actress. She could feign an emotion—or hide one. She merely asked: "Is it true that there's no such thing as time in hyper-space?"

"That's right. That's why you can travel scores or hundreds or thousands of light years through hyper-space in hours. Hyper-space is a continuum of only three dimensions. There is no fourth dimension, no dimension of duration."

"Then why aren't trips through hyper-space instantaneous? They take several hours, don't they?"

"Sure, but the way scientists have it figured, that's subjective time. No objective time passes at all. It can't. There isn't any—in hyper-space."

"Then you mean—"

Ramsey shook his head. "0134:02," he said. "It's almost time."

The seconds ticked away. Even Margot did not seem

relaxed now. She stared nervously at the chronometer, or watched Ramsey's lips as he silently read away the seconds. A place where time did not exist, an under-stratum of extension *sans* duration. An idea suddenly entered her mind, and she was afraid.

If proto-man had colonized the galactic worlds between one and four or five million years ago, but if time did not exist for proto-man, then wasn't the super-race which had engendered all mankind still waiting in its timeless home, waiting perhaps grimly amused to see which of their progeny first discovered their secret? Or must proto-man, like humans everywhere, fall victim to subjective time if objective time did not matter for him?

Ramsey was saying softly: "Fifty-three, fifty-four, fifty-five, fifty-six . . . blastoff!"

His hand slammed down on the activating key.

An instant later, having felt no sensation of acceleration, they were floating weightlessly in the cabin of the little *Enterprise*.

"The qualities of radar," Garr Symm said, "exist in their totality in a universe of extension. Time, actually is a drawback to radar, neces-

sitating a duration-lag between sending and receiving. Therefore, Ramar Chind, radar behaves perfectly in hyper-space, as you see."

"Yes," Ramar Chind said, floating near the radar screen aboard the *Dog Star*. At its precise center was a bright little pip of light.

The Enterprise. . . .

"But don't we do anything except follow them?" Ramar Chind said after a long silence.

Garr Symm smiled. "Does it really matter? You see, Chind, time actually stands still for us here. Duration is purely subjective, so what's your hurry?"

Ramar Chind licked his lips nervously and stared fascinated at the little pip of bright light.

Which suddenly dipped and swung erratically.

"What is it?" Margot asked. "What's the matter?"

"Take it easy," Ramsey told her.

"But the ship's swooping. I can feel it. I thought you weren't supposed to feel movement in hyper-space!"

"Relax, will you? There are eddies in hyper-space, that's all. If you want an analogy in terms of our own universe, think of shoals in

an ocean — unmarked by buoys or lights."

"You mean they have to be avoided?"

"Yes."

"But this particular shoal — it's midway between Irwadi and Earth?"

"There isn't any 'midway,' Margot. That's the paradox of hyper-space."

"I—I don't understand."

"Look. In the normal universe, extension is measured by time. That is, it takes a certain amount of time to get from point A to point B. Conversely, time is measured by extension in space. On Earth, a day of time passes when Earth moves through space on an arc one three-hundred-sixty-fifth of its orbit around the sun in length. Since there isn't any time to measure extension with in hyper-space, since time doesn't exist here, you can't speak of midpoints."

"But this—shoal. It's always encountered in hyper-space between Earth and Irwadi?"

Ramsey nodded. "Yes, that is right."

Margot smiled.

The smile suddenly froze on her face.

The *Enterprise* lurched as if an unseen giant hand had slapped it.

At that moment Ramsey leaned forward over the controls, battling to bring the *Enterprise* back on course.

And let down his mental guard.

... precise place in hyperspace her father must have meant ... home of proto-man ... thinks I'm going to stop there, she's crazy ... heck, I'm no mystic, but there are things not meant to be meddled with ...

The ship swooped again. Ramsey went forward against the control panel head-first and fell dazed from the pilot chair. His head whirled, his arms and legs were suddenly weak and rubbery. He tried to stand up and make his way back to the controls again, but collapsed and went down to his knees. He crouched there, trying to shake the fog from his brain.

With a cry of triumph, Margot Dennison leaped at him and bore him down to the floor with her weight. He was still too dazed from the blow on his head to offer any resistance when her strong hands tugged at his belt and withdrew the m.g. gun. She got up with it, backing away from him quickly toward the rear bulkhead as the ship seemed to go into a smooth glide which could be felt

within it. Vardin stood alongside Ramsey, a hand to her mouth in horror. Ramsey got up slowly.

"Stay where you are!" Margot cried, pointing the m.g. gun at him. "I'll kill you if I have to. I'll kill you, Ramsey, I mean it."

Ramsey did not move.

"So you knew about my father," Margot challenged him.

"Yeah. So what?"

"And this shoal in hyperspace is a world, isn't it?"

Ramsey nodded. "I think so."

"O.K. Sit down at the controls, Ramsey. That's right. Don't try anything."

Ramsey was seated in the pilot chair again. His head was still whirling but his strength had returned. He wondered if he could chance rushing her but told himself she meant what she said. She would kill him in cold blood if she had to.

"Bring the *Enterprise* down on that world, Ramsey."

He sat there and stubbornly shook his head. "Margot, you'll be meddling with a power beyond human understanding."

"Rubbish! You read my father's letter, didn't you? That fear's been implanted in

your genes. It's part of the heredity of our people. It's rubbish. Bring the ship down."

Still Ramsey did not move. Vardin looked from him to Margot Dennison and back again with horror in her eyes.

"I'll count three," Margot said. "Then I'll shoot the Vegan girl. Do you understand?"

Ramsey's face went white.

"One," Margot said.

Vardin stared at him beseechingly.

Ramsey said: "All right, Margot. All right."

Five minutes later, subjective time, the *Enterprise* landed with a lurch.

That they had reached a world in hyper-space there could be no doubt. But outside the portholes of the little freighter was only the murky grayness of the timeless hyper-space continuum.

"They've gone down, sir!" Ramar Chind cried.

Garr Symm nodded. For the first time he was really nervous. He wondered about the Dennison letter. Could his fear be attributed to ancestral memory, as Dennison had indicated? Was it really baseless—this crawling, cold-fingered hand of fear on his spine?

There was no physical barrier. The *Enterprise* had established that fact. Then was there a barrier which Garr Symm, along with all humanoids, had somehow inherited?

A barrier of stark terror, subjective and unfounded on fact?

And beyond it—what?

Power to chain the universe. . . .

Think, Garr Symm told himself. You've got to be rational. You're a scientist. You've been trained as a scientist. This is their barrier, erected against you, against all humanoids, a million years ago. It isn't real. It's all in your mind.

"Do you want me to follow them down?" Ramar Chind asked.

Garr Symm envied the policeman. Naturally, Ramar Chind did not share his terror. You didn't know the terror until you learned about proto-man; then the response seemed to be triggered in your brain, as if it had been passed to you through the genes of your ancestors, waiting a million years for release. . . .

Fear, a guardian.

Of what? Garr Symm asked himself. Think of that, fool. Think of what it guards.

Power—

Teleportation or its equivalent.

Gone the subjective passage of hours in hyper-space.

Earned — if you were strong enough or brave enough to earn it—the ability to travel instantly from one humanoid world to another. Instantly. Perhaps from any one point on any humanoid world to any one point, precise, specific, exact, on another world.

To plunder.

Or assassinate.

Or control the lives of men, everywhere.

Sans ship.

Sans fear.

Sans the possibility of being caught or stopped.

Sweating, Garr Symm said: "Bring the *Dog Star* down after them, Ramar Chind."

Ramsey smiled without humor. "What now, little lady?" he said mockingly.

"Shut up. Oh, shut up!"

"What are you going to do now?"

"I told you to shut up. I have to think."

I didn't know a gorgeous tri-di actress ever had to think."

"Let me see those figures again," Margot said.

Ramsey handed her the tapes from the *Enterprise's* environment-checker.

Temperature: minus two hundred and twenty degrees Fahrenheit.

Atmosphere: none.

Gravity: eight-tenths Earth-norm.

"And we don't have a spacesuit aboard," Ramsey said.

"But it can't be. It can't. This is the home of proto-man. I know it is. But if I went out there I'd perish from cold in seconds and lack of air in minutes."

"That's right," Ramsey said almost cheerfully. "So do I take the ship back up?"

"I hate you, Jason Ramsey. Oh, I hate you!" Margot cried. Then suddenly: "Wait! Wait a minute! What was that you were thinking? Tell me! You must tell me—"

Ramsey shook his head and tried to force the thoughts from his mind with doggerel. Ben Adam, he thought. Abou Ben Adam, Humpty Dumpty, hurry, hurry, hurry, the only two headed get yours here the sum of the square of the sides is equal to the square of the hyper-space, no, mustn't think that mimsy were the borogroves and the momraths now what the heck did the momraths do anyhow absolute

zero is the temperature at which all molecular activity. . . .

"What were you thinking, Ramsey?"

His mind was a labyrinth. There were thousands of discrete thoughts, of course. Millions of them, collected over a lifetime. But all at once he did not know his way through that labyrinth and his thoughts kept whirling back to the one Margot Denison wanted as if, somehow, she could pluck it from his mind.

She stood before him, her brow furrowed, sweat beading her pretty face.

And she was winning, forcing the thought to take shape in Ramsey's mind—

But if went out there I'd perish from cold in seconds and lack of air in minutes.

Cold, came the known and unbidden thoughts to Ramsey's struggling mind. And lack of air. Attributes of extension, of space, but measured by duration, by time. And since time does not exist in hyper-space, the vacuum out there and the terrible, killing cold, could have no effect on you. You could go out there perfectly protected from the lethal environment by the absence of the time dimension.

Margot smiled at him. "Thank you," she said. "Thank you, Ramsey."

He was about to speak, but she added: "And don't give me that stuff about a power we shouldn't tamper with. I'm going out there. Now."

Ramsey nodded slowly. "I won't stop you."

"But just so you don't get any ideas of stranding me here—Vardin. Vardin's going with me."

The Vegan girl looked at Ramsey mutely.

Ramsey said: "What makes you think I'll let you take her?"

Margot smiled again. "The m.g. gun makes me think so."

"The heck of it is, you're not really bad, Margot. This thing's got you, is all. You're not essentially evil."

"Thank you for the thrilling compliment. I'm delighted," Margot said sarcastically.

"Vardin stays with me."

Margot reminded him of the lethal m.g. gun by showing it to him, muzzle-first.

He laughed in her face. "Go ahead and shoot."

She stared at him.

"There isn't a lethal weapon'd do you any good here in a timeless continuum. Take an m.g. gun. It induces an

artificial breakdown of radioactive fuel in its chamber, firing an instantly lethal dose of radiation. But in order for radioactive breakdown to occur, time must pass. Even if it's only milliseconds, as in the case of an m.g. gun. There aren't any milliseconds on this world, Margot. There isn't any time. So go ahead and pull the trigger."

Margot frowned and pointed the gun to one side and fired.

Nothing happened. Margot almost looked as if her hard shell had been sundered by the impotence of the m.g. gun. She pouted. Her eyes gleamed moistly.

Then Ramsey said: "O.K. Let's go."

"What — what do you mean?"

"Out there. All of us."

"But I thought you said—"

"Sure, I'm scared stiff. A normal man would be. It's in our genes, according to your father. But I'm also a man. What the devil d'you think it was first got man out of his cave and started along the road to civilization and the stars? It was curiosity. Fear restraining him, and curiosity egging him on. Which do you think won in the end?"

"Oh, Ramsey, I could kiss you!"

"Go right ahead," Ramsey said, and she did.

They opened the airlock. They went outside smiling.

But Vardin, who went with them, wasn't smiling. There was sadness instead.

In cumbersome spacesuits, the five Irwadians made their way from the *Dog Star* to the *Enterprise*. Ramar Chind and his three policemen carried m.g. guns; Garr Symm was unarmed. Chind used a whorl-neutralizer to force the pattern of the lock on the outer door of the *Enterprise's* airlock. Then the five of them plunged inside the ship.

The inner door was not closed.

The *Enterprise* was empty.

Garr Symm looked doubtfully at the gray murkiness behind them. Although the *Dog Star* stood out there less than a quarter of a mile away, they couldn't see it through the murk.

"Where did they go?" Ramar Chind asked.

Symm waved vaguely behind them.

Chind and his men turned around.

Gritting his teeth against the fear which welled up like nausea from the pit of his stomach, Garr Symm went with them.

At that moment they all heard the music.

"You hear it?" Ramsey asked softly. His voice did not carry on the airless world, of course. But he spoke, and the words were understood, not merely by Margot, who could read his mind, but by Vardin as well.

"Music," said Margot. "Isn't it—beautiful?"

Ramsey nodded slowly. He could barely see Margot, although he held her hand. He could barely see Vardin although they stood hand in hand too. The music was un-Earthly, incapable of repetition, indescribably the loveliest sound he had ever heard. He wanted to sink down into the obscuring gray murk and weep and listen to the haunting, sad, lovely strains of sound forever.

"What can it possibly be?" Margot asked.

Surprisingly, it was Vardin who answered. "Music of the Spheres," she said. "It's a legend on Vega III, my world."

"And on Earth," Ramsey said.

Vardin told them: "On all worlds. And, like all such legends, it has a basis in reality. This is the basis."

That didn't sound like tim-

id little Vardin at all. Ramsey listened in amazement. He thought he heard Vardin laugh.

Music. But didn't the notes need the medium of time in which to be heard? How could they hear music here at all? Or were they hearing it? Perhaps it merely impinged on their minds, their souls, just as they were able to hear one another's thoughts as words. . . .

They'd never understand fully, Ramsey knew suddenly. Perhaps they could grasp a little of the nature of this place, a shadow here, the half-suggestion of the substance of reality there, a still-born thought here, a note of celestial music there, the timeless legacy of proto-man, whatever proto-man was. . . .

"The fog is lifting!" Vardin cried.

The fog was not lifting.

Then it was.

Ramsey would never forget that. Vardin had spoken while the dense gray murk enveloped them completely.

Then it began to grow tenuous.

As if Vardin's words had made it so. Little Vardin, shy, frightened Vardin, suddenly, inexplicably, the strongest, surest one among them. . . .

The sky, white and daz-

zling, glistened. The gray murk glistened too, a hundred yards off in all directions, like a wall of polished glass surrounding them.

In the very middle of the bell-jar of visibility granted them all at once, stood a black rectangular object.

"The teleporter!" Margot cried. "The matter-transmitter! I know it is. I *know* it is!"

Ramsey stood waiting breathlessly.

No, he realized abruptly, not breathlessly. You couldn't say breathlessly.

For Ramsey had not breathed, not once, since they left the *Enterprise*.

You didn't breathe on a timeless world. You merely—somehow—existed.

"It's opening!" Margot cried.

The black rectangle, ominously coffin-shaped, was indeed opening.

"The matter transmitter," Margot said a second time. "The secret of proto-man, of our ancestors who colonized all the worlds of space with it, instantly, at the same cosmic moment. Think of what it means, Ramsey, can you? Instantaneous travel, anywhere, without the need for energy since energy cannot be used here, without the

passage of time since time does not exist here." She stood transfixed, looking at the black box. The lid had lifted at right angles to the rest of the box.

Margot said, in the whisper of an awed thought: "Who controls it controls the galaxy . . ."

And she walked toward the box.

At that moment Ramsey had a vision. He saw—or thought he saw—Margot Dennison in the costume she had worn when they first met. She stood, eyes wide, fearful, expectant, before a chessboard. The pieces seemed to be spaceships. It was a perfectly clear vision, but it was the only such vision Ramsey had ever been vouchsafed in his life. He was no mystic. He did not know what to make of it.

Playing chess with Margot was—proto-man.

Ramsey only saw his hand. A hand perhaps five million years old.

He blinked. The vision persisted, superimposed over Margot's figure as she walked toward the box.

A game, he thought. Because we don't understand it. Not that kind of power. Not the power a matter-transmit-

ter would give. A cosmic game on a chess-board which wasn't quite a chess-board, with a creature who had never lived as we know life and so could never die. . . .

With the future of the galaxy hanging in the balance. Life or death for man hanging on a slim thread, because man wasn't ready for matter-transmission, couldn't hope to use it wisely, would use it perhaps for war, transmitting lethal weapons, thermonuclear, world-destroying weapons, instantly through space, for delivery anywhere, negating time. . . .

Death hovered.

"Wait!" Ramsey called, and ran forward.

Just then five new figures, space-suited, appeared under the gleaming dome.

"Stop that woman!" a voice which Ramsey should not have been able to hear but which he somehow heard perfectly cried. "Stop her!"

M.g. guns were raised, fired.

Without effect.

Three of the spacesuited figures ran after Margot as the voice repeated: "Stop her! The box is mine, mine!"

It was Garr Symm's voice.

Ramsey did not know if he should stop Margot himself, or fight Symm's men. Al-

though they couldn't use their weapons on this world, they could still hurt—possibly even kill—Margot. Ramsey turned and waited for them.

The strange, mystic vision was gone. He saw only three space-suited figures, saw Margot walking steadily toward the box. Either she was moving very slowly or the box retreated or it was further away than it had looked at first. For she hadn't reached it yet.

Ramsey met the space-suited figures head-on.

There were three of them, but they were awkward in their suits, cumbersome, incapable of quick responses.

Ramsey hit the first one in the belly and darted back. His fist felt contact with the soft bulk of the insulated suit, then with the harder bulk of the man. He struck again, harder this time.

The scalely green face of the Irwadi within the space-suit grimaced with pain. He doubled over and fell, his helmet shattering against the ground at Ramsey's feet.

Then an incredible thing happened. The Irwadi opened his mouth to scream. His face froze. He lost his air. His face bloated.

And he died.

Ramsey couldn't believe his eyes.

It was not possible to die from lack of air or from cold on a world without the time continuum. Ramsey, Vardin and Margot had proved that by venturing out without protection.

But the Irwadi had died.

Mental suggestion?

Because he thought he would die?

Because that was the only way you could perish on a world lacking in the time dimension — by your own thoughts?

The second space-suited figure closed with Ramsey awkwardly. Ramsey hit him. The man of Irwadi fell, his helmet cracked, he tried to scream—and died.

The third man fled.

Ramsey ran after Margot. "Wait!" he cried. He couldn't talk to her about his fantastic vision. It was personal. She wouldn't understand. Mystic experience always is like that. And yet, with the conviction that only a mystic can have—although he certainly was no mystic—Ramsey knew the galaxy would be in grave trouble if mankind were given the secret of matter-transmission.

A voice said: "You are right."

It was Vardin's voice, and Vardin went on:

"Ramsey, stop her. I can't stop her. It is only granted that I observe—and convince, if I can. I am not a Vegan girl. I am—"

Ramsey said it. "Proto-man!"

"There aren't many of us left. We discovered matter-transmission. We used it once, to people the worlds of the galaxy. It was our final creative effort. We merely observe now, unable to destroy our creation, trying to keep it out of mankind's hands. You see—"

"Then back on Irwadi you knew all along we would come here!"

"I was vouchsafed the vision, yes. Even as you—stop her, Ramsey. You must stop her!"

Ramsey sprinted forward. Margot was nearing the black coffin now.

Ramsey ran at her, and tackled her.

They went down together, the girl fighting like a tigress, tooth and nail, wildly, sobbing, striking out at Ramsey with small impotent fists, until he subdued her. Panting, they glared at each other.

And could not stop Garr Symm from running past

them, eyes rapt behind the plastiglass of his helmet, and jumping into the black box.

"To the end of the universe and back!" he cried. "Take me there and back. Instantly. Prove to me that you work! Now . . ." His voice trailed off. He had addressed the black rectangle almost as if it were something alive.

Ramsey thought he heard a growl from the box. He stood before it, looking in. The hackles rose on his neck.

"You see," Vardin said. "My ancestors and yours discovered the power of a god—and did not understand it. We were incorporeal. We created life—your ancestors. We patterned it to fit the evolution of the three thousand worlds. Human life. Millions of them, colonists for the worlds of normal space. We were tampering in our tragic pride, Ramsey, with forces we would never comprehend.

"We colonized the worlds, deciding that physical existence, along with the mental prowess we had, was the ideal state. A few of us, like myself, or my ancestors if you wish, although the purely mental lives continuously—a few of us stayed behind and saw—the loss of a million years!"

Ramsey's eyes still could not pierce the darkness inside the box.

"What do you mean?" he asked in an awed voice.

"We sent out god-like men. We did not understand our discovery. The god-like men—but look at Garr Symm."

The spacesuited figure got up slowly. It blinked at Ramsey. It growled: It had a recognizably green, scale-skinned face. But it was not the face of Garr Symm. It was the face of Garr Symm's cave-man ancestors, a million years ago. . . .

"This is what happened to my people," Vardin said.

She looked at Ramar Chind and Chind, responding, went to Garr Symm and led him quietly back toward the *Dog Star*. Chind never said a word. Garr Symm growled.

"Take the Earthgirl and go," Vardin told Ramsey.

"But I—you—aren't you coming?"

"My work is finished," Vardin told him. "For now."

"For now?"

"I am a guardian. When I am needed again—" She shrugged her slim blue shoulders.

"But Margot will never be content now," Ramsey protested. "Not when she's come so close."

"She'll understand. Just as you understand. You'll be good for each other, Ramsey, you and the girl. She's had only her fierce pride and her dreams of power. She has room for love. She needs love."

"But you—"

"I? I am nothing. I am the end-product of an equation our ancestors found a million years ago. An equation to give them god-like power. Instead it made them savages and I have had to watch their slow climb back to the stars. An equation, Ramsey. Almost an equation of doom. Now go."

Vardin flickered, became insubstantial. Her body seemed to melt into the gray mists.

The gleaming walls were gone. The black box was gone. Vardin was gone.

Ramsey led Margot back to the *Enterprise*.

Moments later—although the elapsed time was subjective—they blasted off.

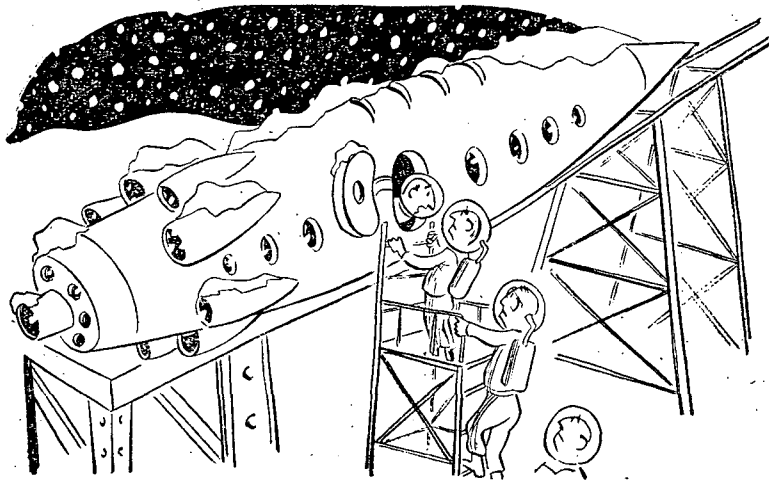
Margot opened her eyes. She had been sleeping. She smiled at Ramsey tremulously. "I love you," she said. Her words seemed to surprise her.

"I can't go back to Earth," Ramsey said.

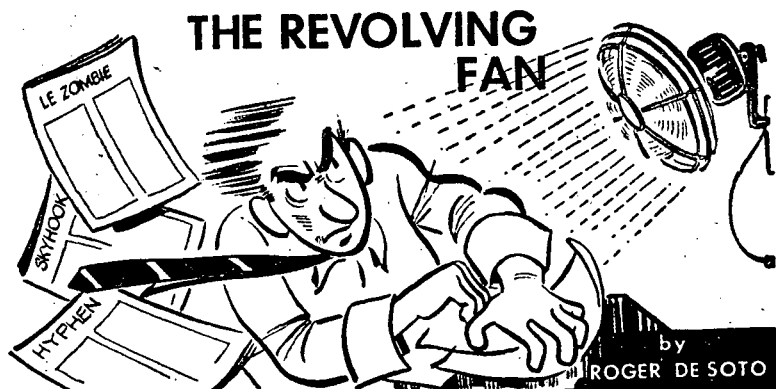
"Who wants to go back to Earth—if you can't?"

They had, Ramsey knew, all of space and the life-span of mortal man to enjoy together.

THE END



"We forgot the anti-freeze!"



IN THE batch that lies before us now, we've noted a trend to succumb to the influence of the Near and Far East. For some obscure reason, a number of the 'zines this month read (not line-by-line, but page-by-page) from right to left. It's different, all right, but almost got us into trouble with Ye Editor as we began this column wrong side first.

CRY OF THE NAMELESS. #94. *Wally Weber, Box 92, 920 Third Ave., Seattle 4, Washington. 10¢. 30 pp.*

A better than average yarn by Hubbard Green leads off the issue, purportedly written to illustrate the cover, followed by the vitriolic pen of Renfrew Pemberton who, in his own words, "plows under" current pro SF magazines, and backed up by the sympathetic eye and typer of Amelia Pemberton who goes over the current fan crop with loving care. The well-rounded 'zine is filled out with other material on pro SF, past and present, and two other not-so-good-as-lead fiction offerings by W. Kraus and Erik Von Spencer.

SATA. #4. *Dan L. Adkins, P. O. Box 258, Luke Air Force Base, Glendale, Arizona. 10¢. 15 pp.*

Adkins, we note, promised us something all new in his last issue, but apparently his burning desire somehow got side-tracked and the newness turns out to be something other than what this reviewer at any rate, expected. This is one of the artiest (in the good sense!) 'zines around—contributions by Adkins, Cornelius Lawley, Marv Bryer, Larry Bourne and

Juanita Coulson. There are many well-executed jobs some of which are just for decoration and some of which illustrate a not-too-far-from-professional yarn by Charles Morris. Loads of letters aptly commented on and an analysis of the Presley Phenomenon (you know, Elvis) by co-editor Bill Pearson. The newest thing about SATA is the *much* improved appearance. (Suggestion to Adkins and Pearson; how about numbering *all* the pages? What happens when you go over twenty and we run out of digital extremities?)

BRILLIG. #4. *Larry S. Bourne, 2436 1/2 Portland Street, Eugene, Oregon. 10¢. 23 pp.*

This issue is a tribute to R. R. Phillips, whose weirdly engaging drawings are liberally sprinkled throughout the pages and whose biography is written up by the editor. This is one of the friendliest 'zines we've come across, especially the autobiography of Bourne, and the relaxed treatment of the cinema by Georgina Ellis. Geis and Bourne present their respective Torture Gardens (fan reviews, natch), but the laurels here go to Kent Moomaw, whose piece we nearly cracked some ribs laughing over. The article tells all, holds nothing back, etc., etc., as they say, on how to crack a certain well-known SF magazine. Worth framing, as they say. Incidentally, BRILLIG, like SATA (possibly due to interlocking directorates) is another one of those right to left jobs—we're beginning to get cross-eyed.

PEON. #37. *Charles Lee Riddle, PNC, USN, USS Cascade, (AD-16), Fleet Post Office, New York, New York. 15¢. 22 pp.*

This is one of the neatest and finest 'zines that we've seen in quite a while. Uncle Sam apparently agrees with us, since the editor is doing his ship's paper and working on its Cruise Book, which two facts are only a taste of the interesting ones presented by C. L. R. There are only two stories here: one by Ron Smith is an SF take-off on a type (unprintable here) of pun, and the other a funny postscript to the flying saucer biz that is *not* trite. Bob Tucker holds forth sanely and seriously on the duties of fan editors, Jim Harmon on the place of SF in the world of literature (more or less), and James Gunn on the contrasts between *Science Fiction and the Reader's Digest*. A small, but significant contribution

from South Africa (by P. Kruis) is worthy of earnest consideration—it deals with the free interchange of ideas and the obstacles to same that his group encounters.

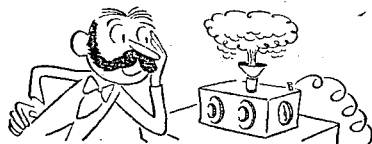
JD. #24. L. A. Hickman, 710 Boulevard N. E., Orangeburg, South Carolina. 20¢. 21 pp.

Jim Harmon's "Know the Pros" cartoons are fine and the fanzine reviewer, Bob Hoskins, is lucky enough to have some foreign 'zines to latch onto, and Bob Madle's account of the doings of the Second Southeastern Science Fiction Convention is sprightly and well-detailed. However, Lynn Hickman would do very well indeed to peruse thoroughly every fan-oriented non-fiction word uttered in the pages of PEON #37. Unfortunately, 90% of JD cannot remotely be classified as science fiction, except for the peculiarities of the thinking processes exhibited by Hal Annas and some resurrected unclassifiable something by Bert Garwell. If you out there want to know what the issue contains, it is devoted almost exclusively to a violent collection of segregationist diatribes. There's no objection to controversy, and we won't stoop to argue with the viewpoints expressed in JD, but if it goes on in this vein, it will cease to be a fanzine and degenerate to the rank of outright propaganda.

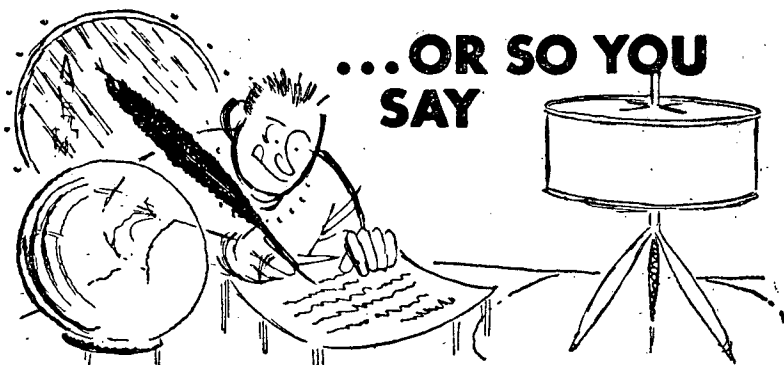
ATOMIC

CON

MAN



... so-called "atomic power" was responsible for a hoax which deceived the American public for over 24 years. John Keely, an inventor of Philadelphia, claimed that through his discovery of atomic power, he could make a quart of water run a thirty car railway train 75 miles in 75 minutes. He made frequent demonstrations of the "power" contained in water, bending heavy iron bars, lifting immense weights, and the like—demonstrations which caused thousands of investors to place millions of dollars with him. Only when he died, in 1898, was it discovered that the awesome demonstrations had been actuated by a compressed-air machine in the cellar of his home and laboratory. This was connected to Keely's "atomic engine" by a concealed pipe in the floor.



BY THE READERS

Dear Editor:

The lead in the November *Amazing* was better than the last few we've had, only fault I can find with this one is that after a good background was laid out, the ending was too abrupt. I'd have liked to see it with an additional 10,000 words. The shorts ranged from fair to very good. The best in my opinion being Sam Merwin's "Service Elevator," Livingston's "Concerto for a Pink Elephant," and Silberberg's "The Rivals." The short-short "The Idiot" pointed out a human failing that's more truth than fiction!

The illos were very much up to par, with Finlay's being the best. I see you even scrounged one out of Leo Summers. He's the only artist that uses a "loose" or "sketchy" type of artwork that I like. More by both of these, please. The cover, although more symbolic than anything in the lead yarn (Val likes those black backgrounds, doesn't he?) was well done in his usual fine style. All in all, a very good issue.

Now about these serials you keep mentioning but for some reason never get into the magazine . . . produce!

Herbert E. Beach
210 West Paquin
Waterville, Minn.

• *Speaking of Leo Summers, pick up a copy of the first issue of DREAM WORLD. You'll find some of the most sensational illustrations by our boy that have hit the stands in many a moon. What that lad can do with the undraped—oops! You'll just have to see for yourself.*

Dear Editor:

I was recently browsing through the letter columns in several early '56 *Amazing Stories*. I was surprised to see the depressing number of readers' questions that go unanswered. I am not asking any questions myself, but thought I'd bring this to your attention.

Please expand the book review department. I find the book reviews better than some of the stories. But drop the fanzine reviews, please. I'm not trying to put Mr. De Soto out of a job but I don't care for fanzine reviews.

Who says science fiction is declining? It isn't, at least not in my area. Two new magazines have appeared. Paperbacks are more plentiful. Stores are selling more magazines and paperbacks.

Don't go back to pulp size, stay pocket size. Also put some good humor in *Amazing* and a serial now and then. More Finlay illos.

Michael LaBorde
8124 Lockney Ave.
Takoma Park, Maryland

• *That's right. Who said science fiction is declining? It isn't in our area either, and that covers North America, South America, Europe, and—believe it or not—Asia. We'll see what we can do about more book reviews and we're going to stay pocket-size. Happy now, Michael? We are because Amazing's circulation is climbing up and up.*

GUSHER ON THE SEINE

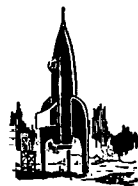
Garland Texas hat designer Harry Rolnick tells of the Texas bopster who saw the Eiffel Tower for the first time. He asked his native guide: "How many barrels a day do you reckon you get out of that rig?"



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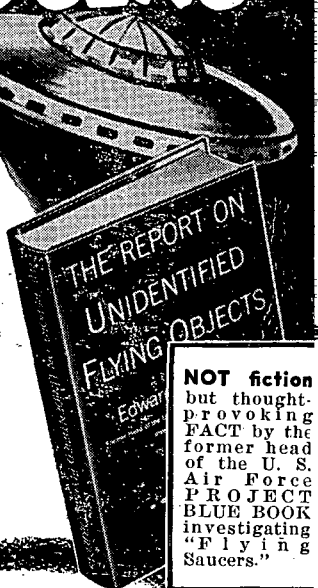
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